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SEPTEMBER
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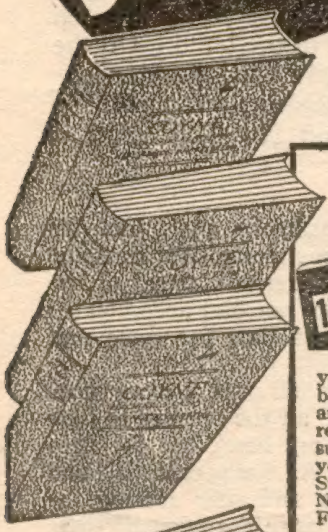

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THE STRAWBOSS

THIS month we're going to turn the column over to an old friend of ours, Mr. George Bolds, now of New York City, but formerly of Dodge City and points West during the days of the thundering cattle trade. Mr. Bolds is one of the few whose lifetimes have bridged the gap between today and the roaring years of the West's beginning.

As such, we think he is uniquely interesting to Western readers, for he is living proof that history is not solely a thing to moulder in textbooks, to be crammed into unwilling students' heads by dry-as-dust teachers—it is the very stuff of life itself, as real and human as today's newspaper.

George Bolds knew Dodge when the town was young. He was a friend of the great and near-great on that turbulent frontier, and played his own part in the building of the West. One time, however, his career almost came to an untimely end, via the long rope and short prayer route. Here is George's own story of that incident, reminiscent of those salty days when there was "No Law West of Newton, and No God West of Dodge!"

Way back yonder when the West was new, everyone had to stand on his own or get a free trip to Boot Hill. When the incident I'm going to tell you about happened, I'd been around Dodge and Cimarron for some time, and counted such men as Bat Masterson, the Earps and Bill Tilghman as my friends. But I had never been to Santa Fe, and when I heard that Wyatt Earp and Bill Tilghman was going there on business, I asked if I could tag along.

Santa Fe was wide open and pretty wild at that time. The better element that was on the side of the law, was mostly whites. The rest was outlaws, rustlers, gamblers and mixed breeds that was in hiding for crimes committed in other territories.

While looking over the town, I tried to be a good scout. Gambled some and bought tequila for the señoritas in the dance halls and thought I was one hell of a good fellow. But the fact was, I was just a damn green fool, and did not have the sense to know it.

In the most popular saloon, dance hall and gambling joint, I'd often noticed the Mexican who had charge of one table raking in all the big pots. I'd noticed when a big pot was on the table some accident occurred in the room to draw all the players' attention and at such times this Mex's hand would go under the table or into his pocket and he always got the money.

My curiosity about this was my undoing, and nearly caused me to lose an arm.

Bill and Wyatt came in with some cavalrymen, and took a seat at the table on the opposite side of the room. I said to Bill, "While you're visiting with your friends, I'm going to get some of that cash at that Mex table."

"It's a long walk back to Dodge. You stay out of it," he replied. Just then a fellow in the game went broke, and I took his place. The game went along fine for some time, and I was considerable ahead of the game. Finally a large pot had accumulated and I was sure it was time for some real excitement.

Just then a waiter fell over a chair near our table, and caused all the players to look that way. I turned my head, but my eyes never left that Mex. As I expected his hand went under the table, and after cussing the fellow for his disturbance the Mex bet fifty dollars. We was all using cash instead of chips.

I looked him straight in the eyes and said, "I'm calling the hand under the table, and not the one you're holding." Then I showed him the bore of my six-shooter over the edge of the table. He gave me a murderous stare for a moment, then sarcastically said, "You win. Take the pot."

I grabbed a lot of the bills with my left hand and shoved them in my pocket. I slipped the gun to my left hand, and with my right reached for the rest of the money on the table, when it happened. That damn Mexican struck with a knife, intending to pin my hand to the table. It cut the hide off the back side of my wrist to the bone, and my arm was paralyzed. I took a shot at him with my left hand and this caused some excitement.

Wyatt, Bill and the cavalrymen hurried me out a side door and to the barracks, where the surgeon could look after my arm. When the surgeon finished he said, "You're a lucky cuss. If that knife had struck on the under-side of your wrist, you'd been crippled for life."

The captain ordered five troopers to saddle, and bring an extra-gentle horse along

(Continued on page 96)

"THIS WISDOM MUST DIE!"

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FOR every word that has left the lips of bishops or statesmen to enlighten man, a thousand have been withheld. For every book publicly exposed to the inquiring mind, one hundred more have been suppressed—*damned to oblivion*. Each year of progress has been wilfully delayed centuries. Wisdom has had to filter through biased, secret sessions or ecclesiastical council meetings, where high dignitaries of state and church alone proclaimed what man should know.

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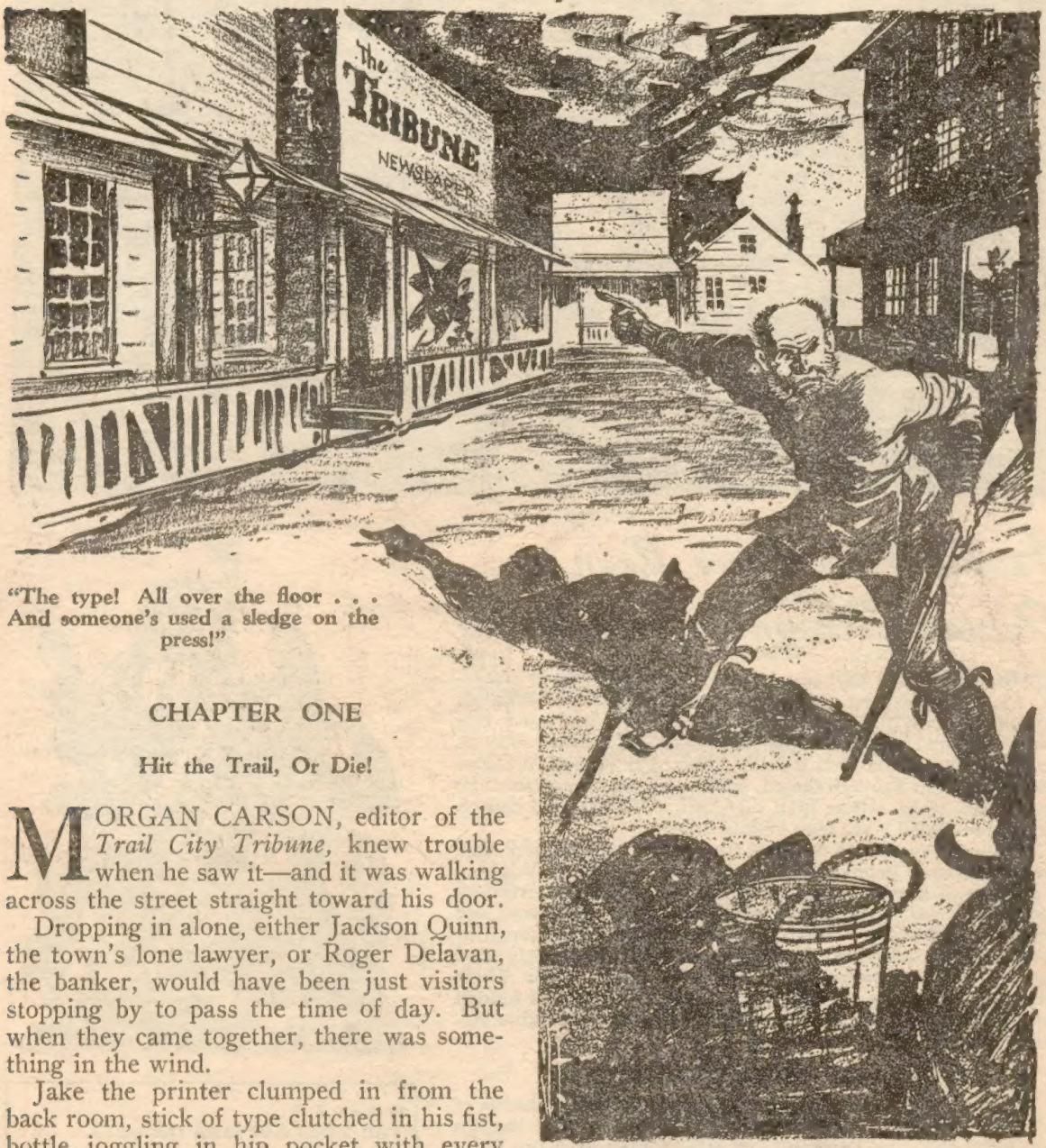


"The type! All over the floor . . . And someone's used a sledge on the press!"

CHAPTER ONE

Hit the Trail, Or Die!

MORGAN CARSON, editor of the *Trail City Tribune,* knew trouble when he saw it—and it was walking across the street straight toward his door.

Dropping in alone, either Jackson Quinn, the town's lone lawyer, or Roger Delavan, the banker, would have been just visitors stopping by to pass the time of day. But when they came together, there was something in the wind.

Jake the printer clumped in from the back room, stick of type clutched in his fist, bottle joggling in hip pocket with every step he took, wrath upon his ink-smeared face.

"Ain't you got that damned editorial writ yet?" he demanded. "Holy hoppin' horntoads, does a feller have to wait all day?"

Carson tucked the pencil behind his ear. "We're getting visitors," he said.

Jake shifted the cud of tobacco to the left side of his face and squinted beneath bushy eyebrows at the street outside.

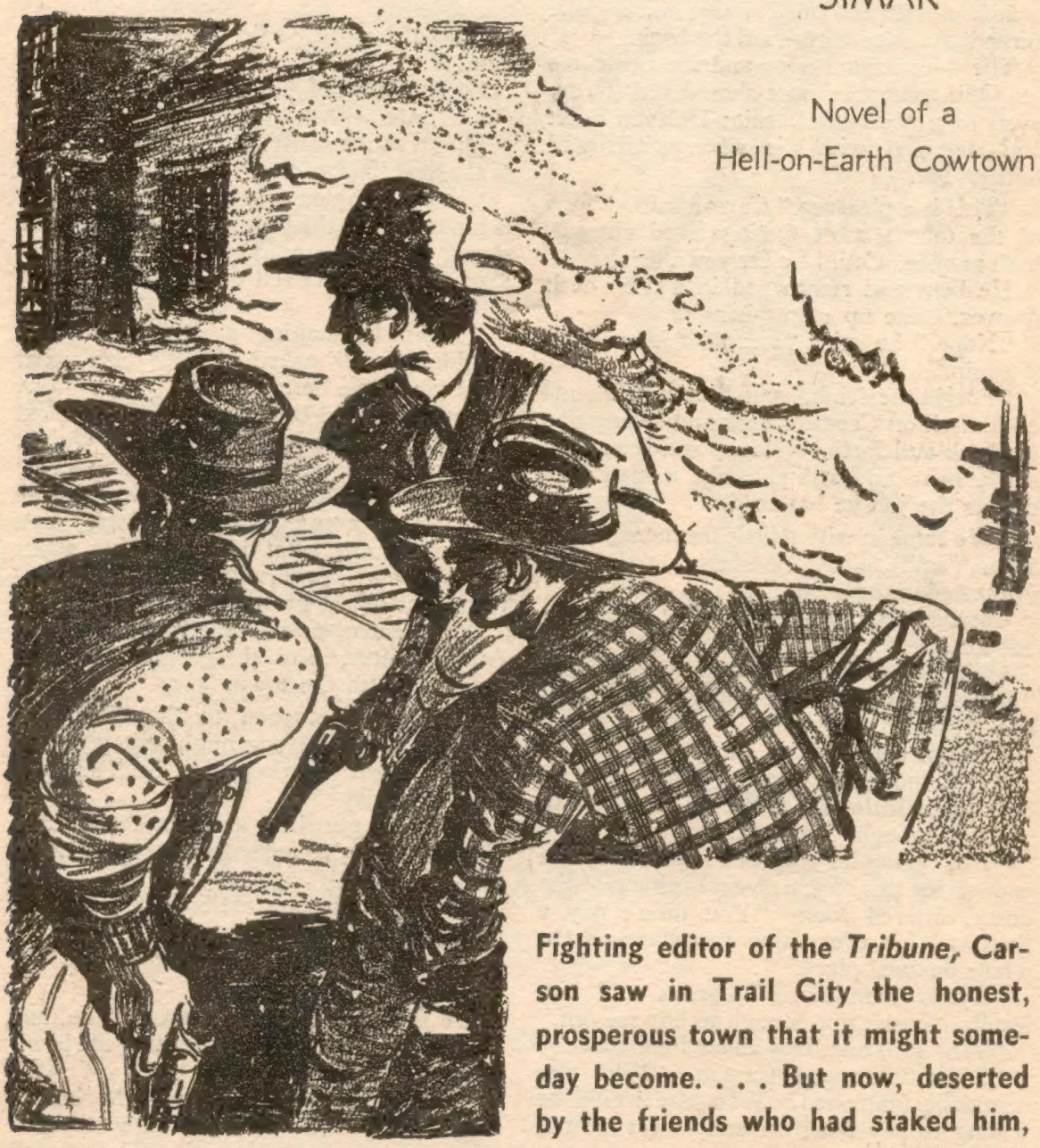
"Slickest pair of customers I ever clapped an eye on," he declared. "I'd sure keep my peepers peeled, with them jaspers coming at me."

"Delavan's not so bad," said Carson.

Crusaders ★

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Novel of a Hell-on-Earth Cowtown



"Just pick pennies off a dead man's eyes, that's all," said Jake.

He spat with uncanny accuracy at the mouse-hole in the corner.

"Trouble with you," he declared, "is you're sweet on that dotter of hisn. Because she's all right, you think her old man is too.

Fighting editor of the *Tribune,* Carson saw in Trail City the honest, prosperous town that it might someday become. . . . But now, deserted by the friends who had staked him, could he buck Byron Fennimore's vicious gun-army—who saw in Trail City, instead of Carson's shining dream, only a vassal outpost of his crooked cattle empire?

Nobody that goes around with Quinn is all right. They're just a couple of cutthroats, in with that snake Fennimore clear up to their hips."

Quinn and Delavan were stepping to the boardwalk outside the *Tribune* office. Jake turned and shuffled toward the back.

The door swung open and the two came in, Quinn huge, square-shouldered, flashy even in a plain black suit; Delavan quiet and dignified with his silvery hair and bowler hat.

"This is a pleasure," Carson said. "Two of the town's most distinguished citizens, both at once. Could I offer you a drink?"

He bent and rummaged in a deep desk drawer, came up empty-handed.

"Nope," he said, "I can't. Jake found it again."

"Forget the drink," said Quinn. He seated himself on Carson's desk and swung one leg back and forth. Delavan sat down in a chair, prim and straight, like a man who dreads the job he has to do.

"We came in with a little business proposition," said Quinn. "We have a man who's interested in the paper."

Carson shook his head. "The *Tribune's* not for sale."

Quinn grinned, pleasantly enough. "Don't say that too quickly, Carson. You haven't heard the price."

"Tempt me," invited Carson.

"Ten thousand," said Quinn, bending over just a little as if to keep it confidential.

"Not enough," said Carson.

"Not enough!" gasped Quinn. "Not enough for this?" He swept his hand at the dusty, littered room. "You didn't pay a thousand for everything you have in the whole damned place."

"Byron Fennimore," Carson told him levelly, "hasn't got enough to buy me out."

"Who said anything about Fennimore?"

"I did," snapped Carson. "Who else would be interested? Who else would be willing to pay ten thousand to get me out of town?"

DELAVAN cleared his throat. "I would say, Morgan, that should have nothing to do with it. After all, a business deal is a business deal. What does it matter who makes the offer?"

He cleared his throat again. "I offer that observation," he pointed out, "merely as a friend. I have no interests in this deal myself. I just came along to take care of the financial end should you care to sell."

Carson eyed Delevan. "Ten thousand," he asked, "spot cash? Ten thousand on the barrel-head?"

"Say the word," said Quinn, "and we'll hand it to you."

Carson laughed harshly. "I'd never get out of town with it."

Quinn spoke softly. "That could be part of the deal," he said.

"Nope," Carson told him, "ten thousand is too much for the paper. I'd sell the paper —just the paper, mark you—for ten thousand. But I won't sell my friends. I won't sell myself."

"You'd be making a stake out of it, wouldn't you?" asked Quinn. "Isn't that what you came here for?"

Carson leaned back in his chair, hooked his thumbs in his vest and stared at Quinn. "I don't suppose," he said, "that you or Fennimore could understand why I came here. You aren't built that way. You wouldn't know what I was talking about if I told you I saw Trail City as a little cowtown that might grow up into a city.

"Gentlemen, that's exactly what I saw. And I'm here, in on the ground floor. I'll grow up with the town."

"Have you stopped to think," Quinn pointed out, "that you might not grow up at all? Might just drop over dead, suddenlike, some day?"

"All your gunslicks are poor shots," said Carson. They've missed me every time so far."

"Maybe up to now the boys haven't been trying too hard?"

"I take it," said Carson, "they'll try real hard from now on."

He flicked a look at Delavan. The man was uneasy, embarrassed, twirling the bowler hat in his hands.

"Let's stop beating around the bush," suggested Carson. "I don't know why you tried it in the first place. As I understand it, Fennimore will give me ten thousand if I quit bucking him, forget about electing Purvis for sheriff and get out of town. If not, the Bar Y boys turn me into buzzard bait."

"That's about it," said Quinn.

"You don't happen to be hankering after my blood, personally?" asked Carson.

Quinn shook his head. "Not me. I'm no gunslinger."

"Neither am I," Carson told him. "Leastwise not professionally. But from now on I'm not wearing this gun of mine for an ornament. I'm going to start shooting back. You can noise that around, sort of gentle-like."

"The boys," said Quinn, sarcastically, "will appreciate the warning."

"And you can tell Fennimore," said Carson, "that his days are over. The days of free range and squeezing out the little fellow are at an end. Maybe Fennimore can stop me with some slugs. Maybe he can stop a lot of men. But he can't stop them forever.

"The day is almost here when Fennimore can't fix elections and hand-pick his sheriffs, when he can't levy tribute on all the businessmen in town, when he can't hog all the water on the range."

"Better put that in an editorial," said Quinn.

"I have," declared Carson. "Don't you read my paper?"

Quinn turned toward the door and Delavan arose. He fumbled just a little with his hat before he put it on. "You're coming to the house tonight for supper, aren't you?" he asked.

"I thought so, up to now," said Carson.

"Kathryn is expecting you," the banker said.

Quinn swung around. "Sure, go ahead, Carson. Nothing personal in this, you understand."

Carson rose slowly. "I didn't think there was. You wouldn't have a man planted along the way, would you?"

"What a thought," said Quinn. "No, my friend, when we get you, it'll be in broad daylight."

CARSON followed them to the door, stood on the stoop outside to watch them leave. They crossed the street toward the bank, the dust puffing up from their boots to shimmer momentarily in the slantings rays of the westering sun.

A horse cantered down the street, coming from the east, its rider slouching in the saddle. A hen scratched industriously in the dust and clucked to an imaginary brood. The sun caught the windows of the North Star Saloon, directly opposite the newspaper office, and turned the glass to glittering silver.

Trail City, thought Editor Morgan Carson, looking at it. Just a collection of shacks today. The North Star and the bank and sheriff's office with the jail behind it. The livery stable and the new store with the barber shop in one corner.

A frontier town, with chickens clucking in the dust and slinking dogs that stopped to scratch for fleas. But someday a great town, a town with trains and water tower instead of a creaking windmill, a town of shining glass and brick.

A man was coming down the steps of the North Star, a big man stepping lightly. Carson watched him abstractedly, recognized him as one of Fennimore's hired hands, probably in town on some errand.

The man started across the street and stopped. His voice came quietly across the narrow stretch of dust.

"Carson!"

"Yes," said Carson. And something in the way the man stood there, something in the single word, something in the way the man's face looked beneath the droopy hat, made him stiffen, tensed every nerve within him.

"I'm calling you," said the man, and it was as if he had asked for a match to light his smoke. No anger, no excitement, just a simple statement.

For a single instant time stood still and stared. Even as the man's hands drove for the gun-butts at his thighs, the street seemed frozen in a motionlessness that went on forever.

And in that timeless instant, Carson knew his own hand was swooping for his gun, that the weapon's butt was in his fist and coming out.

Then time exploded and took up again and Carson's gun was swinging up, easily, effortless, simple as pointing one's finger. The other man's guns were coming up, too, a glitter of steel in the sunlight.

Carson felt his gun buck against his hand, saw the look of surprise that came upon the other's face, heard the blast of the single shot ringing in his ears.

The man out in the street was sagging, sagging like a slowly collapsing sack, as if the strength were draining from him in the dying day. His knees buckled and the guns, still unfired, dropped from his loos-

ened fingers. As if something had pushed him gently, he pitched forward on his face.

For an instant more, the stillness held, a stillness even deeper than before. The man on the horse had reined up and was motionless, the scratching hen was a feathery statue of bewilderment.

Then doors slammed and voices shouted; feet pounded on the sidewalks. The saloon porch boiled with men. Bill Robinson, white apron around his middle, ducked out of the store. The barber came out and yelled. His customer, white towel around his neck, lather on his face, was pawing for his gun, swearing at the towel.

Two men came from the sheriff's office and walked down the street, walked toward Carson, standing there, still with gun in hand. They walked past the dead man in the street and came on, while the town stood still and watched.

CARSON waited for them, fighting down the fear that welled within him, the fear and anger. Anger at the trap, at how neatly it had worked.

The door slammed behind him and Jake was beside him, a rifle in his hand.

"What's the matter, kid?" he asked.

Carson motioned toward the man lying in the dust.

"Called me," he said.

Jake shifted his cud of tobacco to the north cheek.

"Dang neat job," he said.

Sheriff Bert Bean and Stu Leonard, the deputy, stopped short of the sidewalk.

"You do that?" asked Bean, jerking a thumb toward the dust.

"I did," admitted Carson.

"That bein' the case," announced Bean, "I'm placin' you under arrest."

"I'm not submitting to arrest," said Carson.

The sheriff's jaw dropped. "You ain't submittin'—you what!"

"You heard him," roared Jake. "He ain't a-going with you. Want to do anything about it?"

Bean lifted his hands towards his guns, thought better of it, dropped them to his side again.

"You better come," Bean said with something that was almost pleading in his voice. "If you don't, I got ways to make you."

"If you got ways," yelped Jake, "get going on 'em. He's calling your bluff."

The four men stood motionless for a long, dragging moment.

Jake broke the tension by jerking his rifle down. "Get going," he yelled. "Start high-tailing it back to your den, or I'll bullet-dance you back there. Get out of here and tell Fennimore you dassn't touch Carson 'cause you're afraid he'll gun-whip you out of town."

The crowd, silent, motionless until now, stirred restlessly.

"Jake," snapped Carson, "keep an eye on that crowd out there."

Jake spat with gusto, snapped back the hammer of the gun. The click was loud and ominous in the quiet.

Carson walked slowly down the steps toward the sidewalk, and Bean and Leonard backed away. Carson's gun was in his hand, hanging at his side, and he made no move to raise it, but as he advanced the two backed across the street.

Quinn pushed his way through the crowd in front of the bank and strode across the dust.

"Carson," he yelled, "you're crazy. You can't do this. You can't buck law and order."

"The hell he can't," yelped Jake. "He's doing it."

"I'm not bucking law and order," declared Carson. "Bean isn't law and order. He's Fennimore's hired hand. He tried to do a job for Fennimore and he didn't get away with it. That man I killed was planted on me. You had Bean sitting over there, all ready to gallop out and slap me into jail."

Quinn snarled. "You got it all doped out, haven't you?"

"I'm way ahead of you," said Carson. "You used a man that was just second-rate with his guns. Probably had him all primed up with liquor so he thought he was greased hell itself. You knew that I'd outshoot him and then you could throw a murder charge at me. Smart idea, Quinn. Better than killing me outright. Never give the other side a martyr."

"So what about it?" asked Quinn.

"So it didn't work."

"But it'll work," Quinn declared. "You will be arrested."

"Come ahead, then," snapped Carson.

He half-lifted the sixgun. "I'll get you first, Quinn. The sheriff next—"

"Hey," yelled Jake, "what order do you want me to take 'em in? Plumb senseless for the two of us to be shooting the same people."

Quinn moved closer to Carson, lowered his voice. "Listen, Carson," he said, "you've got until tomorrow morning to disappear."

"What?" asked Carson in mock surprise. "No ten thousand?"

CHAPTER TWO

Gunsmoke Goes to Press

JAKE scrubbed the back of his neck with a grimy hand, his brow wrinkled like a worried hound's.

"You sure didn't make yourself popular with the sheriff," he declared. "Now he ain't going to rest content until you're plumb perforated."

"The sheriff," announced Carson, "won't make a move toward me until he's heard from Fennimore."

"I'm half- hoping," said Jake, "that Fennimore decides on shootin'. This circlin' around, sort of growlin' at one another like two dogs on the prod has got me downright nervous. Ain't nothin' I'd welcome more than a lively bullet party."

Carson tapped a pencil on the desk. "You know, Jake, I figure maybe we won that election right out there on the street. Before tomorrow morning there won't be a man in Rosebud County that hasn't heard how Bean backed down. A story like that is apt to lose him a pile of votes. Fennimore can scare a lot of people from voting for Purvis, but this sort of takes the edge off the scare. People are going to figure that since that happened to Bean, maybe Fennimore ain't so tough himself."

"They'll sure be makin' a mistake," said Jake. "Fennimore is just about the orneriest hombre that ever forked a horse."

Carson nodded gravely. "I can't figure Fennimore will take it lying down. Maybe you better sneak out the back door, Jake, and tell Lee Weaver, over at the livery barn, to do a bit of riding. Tell the boys all hell is ready to pop."

"Good idea," agreed Jake. He shuffled toward the back, and a moment later Carson heard the back door slam behind him.

There was no question, Carson told himself, tapping a pencil on the desk, that the showdown would be coming soon. Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow morning . . . but it couldn't be long in coming.

Fennimore wasn't the sort of man who would wait when a challenge was thrown at him, and what had happened that afternoon was nothing short of a challenge. First the refusal of the offer to buy the paper off, then the refusal to submit to arrest, and finally the bluffing that had sent Bean skulking back to the sheriff's office.

In his right mind, Carson told himself, he never would have done it, never would have had the nerve to do it. But he was sore clear through, and he'd done it without thinking.

The front door opened and Carson looked up. A girl stood there, looking at him: a girl with foamy lace at her throat, silk gloves, dainty parasol.

"I heard what happened," she said. "I came right down."

Carson stood up. "You shouldn't have," he said. "I'm a fugitive from justice."

"You should skulk," she said. "Don't all fugitives skulk?"

"Only when they are in hiding," he said. "I'm not exactly in hiding."

"That's fine," said the girl. "Then you'll be able to eat with us tonight."

"A murderer?" he asked. "Kathryn, your father might not like that. Think of it, a murderer eating with the banker and his charming daughter."

Kathryn Delavan looked squarely at him. "I'll have Daddy come over when he's through work and walk home with you. Probably he'll have something to talk with you about."

"If you do that," Carson said, "I'll come."

THEY stood for a minute, silent in the room. A fly buzzed against a windowpane and the noise was loud.

"You understand, don't you, Kathryn?" asked Carson. "You understand why I have to fight Fennimore—fight for decent government? Fennimore came in here ten years ago. He had money, cattle and men. He settled down and took over the country —free range, he calls it now, but that's just a term that he and men like him invented

to keep for themselves things that were never theirs in the first place. It's not democracy, Kathryn, it's not American. It isn't building the sort of country or the sort of town that common, everyday, ordinary folks want to live in."

He hesitated, almost stammering. "It's sometimes a dirty business, I know, but if gunsmoke's the only answer, then it has to be gunsmoke."

She reached out a hand and touched his arm. "I think I do understand," she said.

She turned away then, walked toward the door.

"Daddy," she told him, "will be over around six o'clock to bring you home."

Carson moved to the window, watched her cross the street and enter Harrison's store. He stood there, for a long time, listening to the buzzing of the fly. Then he went back to the desk and settled down to work.

It was almost seven o'clock when Roger Delavan came, profuse with apology.

"Kathryn will be angry with me," he said, fidgeting with his hat, "but I had some work to do, forgot all about the time."

Outside, dusk had fallen on the street and the windows of the business places glowed with yellow light. There was a sharp nip in the rising wind, and Delavan turned up the collar of his coat. A few horses stood huddled, heads drooping at the hitching post in front of the North Star. Up the street a dog-fight suddenly erupted, as suddenly ceased.

Carson and Delavan turned west, their boots ringing on the sidewalk. The wind whispered and talked in the weeds and grass that grew in the vacant space surrounding the creaking, groaning windmill tower.

"I want to talk with you," said Delavan, head bent into the wind, hat socked firmly on his head. "About what happened today. I am afraid you may think—"

"It was a business deal," Carson told him. "You said so, yourself."

"No, it wasn't," protested Delavan. "It was the rankest sort of bribery and attempt at intimidation I have ever seen. I've played along with Fennimore because of business reasons. Fennimore, after all, was the only business in Trail City for a long time. I blinked at a lot of his methods, thinking they were no more than the growing pains of any normal city. But after what happened today, I had to draw the line. I told Quinn this afternoon—"

Red flame flickered in the weeds beside the tower, and a gun bellowed in the dusk. Delavan staggered, coughed, fell to his knees. His bowler hat fell off, rolled into the street. The wind caught it and it rolled on its rim, like a spinning wagon-wheel.

A man, bent low, was running through the weeds, half-seen in the thickening dark.

Carson's hand dipped for his gun, snatched it free, but the man was gone, hidden in the thicker shadows where no lamplight reached from the windows on the street.

CARSON slid back the gun, knelt beside Delavan and turned him over. The man was a dead weight in his arms; his head hung limply. Carson tore open his coat, bent one ear to his chest, heard no thudding heart.

Slowly, he laid the banker back on the ground, pulled the coat about him, then straightened up. The bowler hat no longer was in sight, but a half-dozen men were running down the street. Among them, he recognized Bill Harrison, the new store owner, by the white apron tied around his middle.

"That you, Harrison?" asked Carson.

"Yeah, it's me," said Harrison. "We heard a shot."

"Someone shot Delavan," said Carson. "He's dead."

They came up and stood silently for a moment, looking at the black shape on the ground. One of them, Carson saw, was Caleb Storm, the barber. Another was Lee Weaver, the liveryman. The others he knew only from having seen them about town. Men from some of the ranches.

Harrison glanced over his shoulder at the North Star. "Guess they didn't hear the shot in there," he said. "Probably hellin g it up a bit."

"I'm thinking about Kathryn," said Carson. "Delavan's daughter. Someone will have to tell her."

"That's right," declared Harrison. He considered it a moment, a square, blocky man, almost squatty in the semi-darkness of the street.

"My old woman will go and stay with her," he said, "but she can't break the news

to her, not all alone. Someone else will have to help her do it."

He looked at Carson. "You were going there just now. Kathryn told me when she came in to buy some spuds."

Carson nodded. "I suppose you're right, Bill. Let's get Delavan in someplace."

Storm and two of the other men lifted the body, started down the street.

"Come down to the store for a minute," said Harrison. "The old lady will be ready to go in a minute or so."

Carson followed Harrison. Weaver lagged until he fell in step with the editor. He stepped close to Carson and pitched his voice low.

"I got word to Purvis," he said. "He sent out riders. Some of the boys will be coming into town."

"I'll be back at the office," Carson told him, "as soon as I can get away."

Feet pattered on the sidewalk behind them and a woman's voice cried out: "Dad-day! Daddy!"

Weaver and Carson spun around.

It was Kathryn Delavan, running across the street, sobs catching in her throat. She would have rushed by, but Carson reached out and stopped her. "No, Kathryn," he said. "Stay back here with us."

She clung to him. "You were so late," she said, "that I came to see—"

He held her close, awkward in his comforting.

"You don't know who—"

Carson shook his head. "It was too dark."

Robinson lumbered through the dusk toward them. "Perhaps," he said, "she might want to come to the store. My wife is there."

The girl stepped away from Carson. "No," she said, "I want to go back home. Martha is there. I'll be all right there with her."

She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "You will bring him home, too?"

Robinson's voice was understanding, almost soft. "Yes, miss, just as soon— In an hour or two."

She moved closer, took Carson's arm, and they moved west up the street, toward the house where supper waited for a man who would not eat it.

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THE clock on the bar said ten when Carson pushed open the door of the North Star.

The place was half-full, and in the crowd Carson singled out a handful of Fennimore's riders—Clay Duffy, John Nobles, Madden and Farady at the bar; Saunders and Downey at a table in a listless poker game. The rest of the men were in from other ranches or were from the town.

Carson walked to the bar and signaled to the bartender.

The man came over. "What'll it be?"

"Fennimore around?" asked Carson.

"You don't give a damn for your life, do you?" snarled the man.

Carson's voice turned to ice. "Is Fennimore here?"

The man motioned with his head. "In the back."

For a moment the room had grown silent, but once again it took up its ordinary clatter of tongue and glass and poker chip. One or two men smiled at Carson as he walked by, but others either turned their heads or did not change expression.

Without knocking, Carson pushed open the back door, stepped into the smoke-filled room.

Three men stared at him from a single round table decorated by two whisky bottles, staring with that suddenly vacant, vicious stare that marks an interrupted conversation.

One was Fennimore, a huge man, wisps of black hair hanging out from under his broad-brimmed hat. Quinn and Bean were on either side of him.

For a moment the stare was unbroken and the silence held. Fennimore was the one who broke it. "What do you want?" he asked, and his voice was like a lash, hard and cold and with a sting in every word.

"I came," said Carson, "to see what was being done about Delavan's murder."

"So," said Fennimore slowly. "So, what do you want to be done about it?"

"I want the man who killed him found."

"And if we don't?"

"I'll say that you don't want him found. On the front page of the *Tribune*."

"Look here, Morgan," said Quinn, "you're in no position to say that. When you yourself are wanted for murder."

"I'm here," said Carson. "Go ahead and take me."

THE three sat unmoving. Fennimore's tongue licked his upper lip, briefly. Bean's whisky-flushed face drained to pasty white.

"No," said Carson. "All right, then—"

"Quinn," interrupted Fennimore, "gave you until tomorrow morning to get out of town. That still holds."

"I'm not getting out," said Carson. "The day when you can tell a man to get out and make it stick is over, Fennimore. Because in another week we're electing a new sheriff, one who will uphold the law of the country and not the law of one cow-boss."

"It's your damned paper," snarled Fennimore. "You and your lousy stories that give me all the trouble. Stirring up the people—"

"What Fennimore means," said Quinn, smiling, "is that you'll never go to press again. . . ."

"But I will," said Carson. "Tonight. I'm not waiting until tomorrow. We go to press tonight instead of tomorrow afternoon. And I'm going to tell how Delavan was shot down from ambush and nothing's being done about it. And I'm going to point out that when I killed a man on fair call this afternoon you wanted to run me in for murder."

"You can't blame any of my boys for killing Delavan," said Fennimore. "Delavan was my friend."

"He was your friend, you mean," said Carson, "until he told Quinn this afternoon that he was all through. After that, Fennimore, you couldn't afford to let him live."

Fennimore hunched forward in his chair. "If you think you can get me to raise the ten thousand ante," he declared, "you're wrong. It was worth that much to get you out of the way, but it's not worth any more."

Carson laughed at him, a laugh that came between his teeth.

"You're still willing to pay that ten thousand?"

Fennimore nodded. "If you leave within the hour. If you get a horse and ride. If you never go back to the office again."

"I knew I had you scared," said Carson, "but I didn't know I could scare you quite so thoroughly."

Slowly he backed out of the door, closed it and strode across the barroom.

CHAPTER THREE

One Against the Town

LIGHT glowed in the windows of the *Tribune* and Carson, hurrying across the street, saw the tiny office was filled with men.

Cries of greeting rose as he stepped through the door, and he stopped for a moment to recognize the faces. There was Gordon Purvis, the candidate for sheriff, Jim Owens, Dan Kelton, Humphrey Ross and others. Lee Weaver was there and so was Bill Robinson.

Jake shambled out of the back room, stick of type clutched in one hand, gunbelt joggling on his hip.

"Ain't you got that damned editorial writ yet?" he demanded. "Holy hoppin' horntoads—"

"Jake," snapped Garson, "how soon can you get out a paper? An extra?"

Jake gasped. "A whole paper? A whole danged paper?"

"No, just one page. Sort of a circular."

"Couple, three hours," said Jake, "if I can use big type."

"All right," said Carson, "get ready for it. I'll start writing."

Jake shifted the cud of tobacco to the left side of his jaw, spat at the mouse-hole.

Owens had risen, was making his way toward Carson. "What you planning to do?" he asked, and his question quieted the room so that Jake's feet, shuffling to the back, sounded almost like a roll of thunder.

"I'm going to blow Fennimore sky-high," said Carson. "I'm going to force him to produce Delavan's murderer or face the assumption that it was he, himself, that ordered the killing."

"You can't do that," said Owens, softly.

"I can't!"

"No, you can't. This thing is getting out of hand. Range-war is apt to break wide open any minute. You know what that means. Our homes will be burned. Our families run out or murdered. Ourselves shot down from ambush."

Purvis leaped to his feet. "You don't know what you're saying, Owens," he shouted. "If they want to shoot it out, we have to shoot it out. If we back down this time, we're done. We'll never—"

"You're safe enough," snarled Owens, "you're all alone. You haven't any family to be worried about. The rest of us—"

"Wait a minute," yelled Carson. "Wait a minute."

They quieted.

"Do you remember when you came in here six months ago to talk this thing over with me?" asked Carson. "You told me then that if I went with you, you'd string along with me. You swore you wouldn't let me down. You agreed this was the showdown. You said you wanted Purvis for sheriff and you'd back him—"

"We know that," yelled Owens, "but it's different now—"

"Let me talk, Owens," snapped Carson, his voice like a knife. "I want to tell you something. Something that happened this afternoon. Fennimore offered me ten thousand if I would sell you out—ten thousand, cash on the barrel-head and a promise that I'd get safely out of town. I turned him down. I told him I wouldn't sell you fellows out. And because I told him that, I have a murder charge hanging over me and Delavan is dead. . . ."

He looked from one to another of them in the deadly quiet, each of them staring in turn at him.

"I refused to sell you men out," said Carson, "and now you're selling me out. You won't back my play. I should have taken that ten thousand."

Their eyes were shifty, refusing to meet his. A strange fear was upon them.

Kelton said, "But you don't understand, Morgan. Our wives and kids. We never thought it would come to this—"

From the street outside came wild shouts and the sound of running feet.

"Fire!" the single word ran through the startled night, crashed into the lamp-lighted *Tribune* office. "Fire! Fire!"

Carson spun toward the window, saw the leaping flames across the street.

"It's my place!" yelled Bill Robinson. "My store! Every dime I have—every dime—"

He was rushing for the door, clawing at the jamb, sobbing in his haste.

The room exploded in a surge of men leaping for the door. Across the street dark figures of men, silhouetted against the windows, hurdled the porch railing of the North Star, hit the street running. At the hitching posts the horses reared and

screamed and pawed at the air in terror.

FLAMES were leaping and racing through the store, staining the whole street red. Smoke mushroomed like an angry cloud, blotting out the stars. Glass tinkled as a window was shattered by the heat.

Carson pounded through the dust. Running figures bumped into him. Voices bellowed—yelling for pails, for someone to start the windmill.

The flames shot through the roof with a gusty sigh, curled skyward, painting the pall of smoke with a bloody hue. One peak of the roof crumbled in as the fire raced through the seasoned timber. In the back something exploded with a whoosh, and for a moment the street was lighted by a garish flare that seemed to illuminate even the racing flames, then thick black clouds of smoke blotted it out.

The kerosene drum had gone up.

The building was dissolving, tongues of fire licking through the solid wall. Someone screamed a warning and the building went, the upper structure plunging in upon the flame-eaten nothingness that lay beneath it. Burning embers sailed into the street and the men ducked as they thudded in the dust.

For a moment the crowd stood stricken into silence, and all that could be heard was the hungry soughing of the fire as it ate its way into oblivion.

Men who had been rushing from the windmill with water to douse the side and roof of the sheriff's office to keep it from catching fire, lowered their buckets and as the fire died down a new sound came: the clanking of the windmill.

Through the crowd came Bill Robinson, face white, shirt smouldering where a brand had fallen. He stopped in front of Carson.

"Everything is gone," he said, almost as if he were talking to himself. His eyes were looking beyond Carson, scarcely seeing him. "Everything. I'm ruined. Everything. . . ."

Carson reached out a hand and gripped the man by the shoulder, but he wrenched away and shook his head, and plodded down the street. Men stood aside to let him pass, not knowing what to say.

Gordon Purvis was at Carson's elbow. He said quietly: "We'll have to figure out something. Pass the hat—"

Carson nodded. "We may as well go back to the office. Nothing we can do here."

A man came leaping through the open door of the *Tribune,* saw them and headed toward them at a run. Carson saw that it was Jake. And as the man drew near he knew there was something wrong.

"The type!" gasped Jake. "All over the floor and throwed out the door. And someone's used a sledge on the press—"

Carson broke into a run, heart down in his stomach, his stomach squeezing to put it back in place, the cold feet of apprehension jigging on his spine.

What Jake said was true.

The back shop was a shambles. Every type case had been jerked out of the cabinets and emptied, some of it heaved out of the door into the grass along the path that ran to the livery stable. The press was smashed as if by a heavy sledge. The same sledge had smashed the cans of ink and left them lying in sticky gobs upon the floor.

The work of a moment—of just the few minutes while the fire was racing through Robinson's store.

Carson stood slump-shouldered and stared at the wreckage.

He finally turned wearily to Purvis. "I guess," he said, "we don't print that extra after all."

Purvis shook his head. "Now we know that fire was no accident," he declared. "They wanted us out of here, and they picked a way that was sure to get us out."

THEY went back to the office and sat down to wait, but no one came in. Outside, hoofs pounded now and again as men mounted their horses and headed out of town. The hum of voices finally subsided until the street was quiet. Sound of occasional revelry still came from the North Star. The windmill, which no one had remembered to shut off, clanked on in the rising wind. The embers of the fire across the street still glowed redly.

Purvis, tilted back in his chair, fashioned a smoke with steady fingers. Jake hauled a bottle from his pocket, took a drink and passed it around.

"I guess they aren't coming back," said Purvis, finally. "I guess all of them feel the way that Owens felt. All of them plumb scared."

"What the hell," asked Jake, "can you do for a gang like that? They come in here wantin' help, and now—"

"You can't blame them," said Carson, shortly. "After all, they have families to think of. They have too much at stake."

He picked up a pencil from his desk, deliberately broke it in one hand, hurled the pieces on the floor.

"They burned out Robinson," he said. "Cold-bloodedly. They burned him out so they could wreck the shop. So they could stop that extra, scare us out of town. A gang like that would do anything. No wonder the other fellows didn't come back. No wonder they high-tailed for home."

He glanced at Purvis. "How do you feel?" he asked.

Purvis' face didn't change. "Got a place where I can stretch out for the night?"

"Sure you want to?"

"Might as well," said Purvis. "All they can do is burn down my shanty and run off my stock." He puffed smoke through his nostrils. "And maybe, come morning, you'll need an extra gun."

CARSON awoke once in the night, saw Jake sitting with his back against the door, his head drooping across one shoulder, his mouth wide open, snoring lustily. The rifle lay across his knees.

Moonlight painted a white oblong on the floor and the night was quiet except for the racing windmill, still clattering in the wind.

Carson pulled the blanket closer around his throat and settled his head back on his coat-covered boots which were serving as a pillow. In the cot, Purvis was a black huddle.

So this is it, thought Carson, staring at the moonlight coming through the window.

The press broken, the type scattered, the men he had been working for deserting, scared out once again by the guns that backed Fennimore. Nothing left at all.

He shrugged off the despair that reached out for him and screwed his eyes tight shut. After awhile he went to sleep.

It was morning when he awoke again, with the smell of brewing coffee in his nostrils. Jake, he knew, had started a small fire in the old air-tight heater in the back. He heard the hiss of bacon hit the pan, sat up and hauled on his boots, shucked into his coat.

The cot was empty.

"Where's Purvis?" he called to Jake.

"Went out to get a pail of water," said Jake. "Ought to be good and cold after running all night long."

Somewhere a rifle coughed, a sullen sound in the morning air. Like a man trying to clear a stubborn throat.

For a moment Carson stood stock still, as if his boot-soles were riveted to the floor.

Then he ran to the side window, the window looking out on the windmill lot, half knowing what he would see there, half afraid of what he'd see.

Purvis was a crumpled pile of clothes not five feet from the windmill. The pail lay on its side, shining in the sun. A vagrant breeze fluttered the handkerchief around Purvis' neck.

The town was quiet. The rifle had coughed and broken the silence and then the silence had come again. Nothing stirred, not even the wind after that one solitary puff that had moved the handkerchief.

Carson swung slowly from the window, saw Jake standing in the door to the back room, fork in one hand, pan of bacon in the other.

"What was it?" Jake demanded. "Too tarnation early in the morning to start shootin'."

"Purvis," said Carson. "He's out there, dead."

Jake carefully set the pan of bacon on a

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chair, laid the fork across it, walked to the corner and picked up his rifle. When he turned around his eyes were squinted as if they already looked along the gun-barrel.

"Them fellers," he announced, "have gone a mite too far. All right, maybe, to shoot a hombre when he's half-expectin' it and has a chance at least to make a motion toward his own artillery. But 'taint right bushwhackin' a man out to get a pail of water."

Jake spat at the mouse-hole, missed it. "Especially," he declared, "before he's had his breakfast."

"Look, Jake," said Carson, "this fight isn't yours. Why don't you crawl out the back window and make a break for it? You could make it now. Maybe later you can't."

"The hell it ain't my fight," yelped Jake. "Don't you go hoggin' all the credit for this brawl. Me, I've had somethin' to do with it, too. Maybe you writ all them pieces takin' the hide off Fennimore, but I set 'em up in type and run 'em off the press."

A VOICE was bawling outside.

"Carson!" it shouted. "Carson!"

Stalking across the room, but keeping well away from the window, Carson looked out.

Sheriff Bean stood in front of the North Star, badge of office prominently pinned on his vest, two guns at his sides.

"Carson!"

"Watch out," said Jake. "If they see a move in here, they'll fill us full of lead."

Carson nodded, stepped out of line of the window and walked to the wall. Drawing his gun, he reached out and smashed a window-pane with the barrel, then slumped into a crouch.

"What is it?" he yelled.

"Come out and give yourself up," bawled Bean. "That's all we want."

"Haven't got someone posted to pick me off?" asked Carson.

"There won't be a shot fired," said Bean. "Just come out that door, hands up, and no one will get hurt."

Jake's whisper cut fiercely through the room. "Don't believe a word that coyote says. He's got a dozen men in the North Star. Open up that door and you'll be first cousin to a sieve."

Carson nodded grimly.

"Say the word," urged Jake, "and I'll pick 'im off. Easy as blastin' a buzzard off a fence."

"Hold your fire," snapped Carson. "If you start shooting now we haven't got a chance. Probably haven't anyway. As it is they've got us dead to rights. Bean, over there, technically is the law and he can kill us off legal-like. Can say later we were outlaws or had resisted arrest or anything he wants to. . . ."

"They killed Delavan and Purvis," yelped Jake. "They—"

"We can't prove it," said Carson bitterly. "We can't prove a thing. And now they've got us backed into a hole. There's nothing we can gain by fighting. I'm going to go out and give myself up."

"You can't do that," gasped Jake. "You'd never get three feet from the door before they opened up on you."

"Listen to me," snapped Carson. "I'm going to give myself up. I'll take a chance on getting shot. You get out of here, through the back. Weaver will let you have a horse. Ride out and tell the boys that Purvis is dead and I'm in jail. Tell them the next move is up to them. They can do what they want."

"But—but—" protested Jake.

"There's been enough killing," declared Carson. "A bit of gunning was all right, maybe, when there still was something to fight for, but what's the use of fighting if the men you're fighting for won't help? That's what I'm doing. Giving them a chance to show whether they want to fight or knuckle down to Fennimore."

He raised his voice. "Bean. Bean."

"What is it?" Bean called back.

"I'm coming out," yelled Carson.

There was silence, a heavy silence.

"Get going," Carson said to Jake. "Out the back. Crawl through the weeds."

Jake shifted the rifle across his arm.

"After you're safe," he insisted. "Until I see you cross that street, I'll stay right here."

"Why?" asked Carson.

"If they get you," Jake told him, "I'm plumb bent on drillin' Bean."

CARSON reached out and yanked the door open. He stood for a moment in the doorway, looking across at Bean, who waited in front of the North Star.

The dawn was clean and peaceful, and

the street smelled of cool dust and the wind of the day had not yet arisen, but only stirred here and there, in tiny, warning puffs.

Carson took a step forward, and even as he stepped a rifle barked; a throaty, rasping bark that echoed among the wooden buildings.

Across the street something lifted Bean off his feet, as if a mighty fist had smote him—struck so hard that it slammed him off his feet and sprawled him in the dust.

At the sound of the shot, Carson had ducked and spun on his heel, was back in the room again, slamming shut the door.

The windows of the North Star sprouted licking spurts of gunflame and the smashing of the *Tribune's* windows for an instant drowned the crashing of the guns. Bullets snarled through the thin sheathing and plowed furrows in the floor, hurling bright showers of splinters as they gouged along the wood.

Carson hurled himself toward his heavy desk, hit the floor and skidded hard into the partition behind it. A slug thudded into the wall above his head and another screamed, ricocheting, from the desk top.

Thunder pounded Carson's ears, a crashing, churning thunder that seemed to shake the room. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jake crouched, half-shielded by the doorway into the back shop, pouring lead through the broken windows. Shell cases rolled and clattered on the floor as the old printer, eye squinted under bushy brow, tobacco tucked carefully in the northeast corner of his cheek, worked the lever action.

From the corner of the desk, Carson flipped two quick shots at one North Star window where he thought he saw for an instant the hint of shadowy motion.

And suddenly he realized there were no sounds of guns, no more bullets thudding into the floor, throwing showers of splinters.

Jake was clawing at the pockets of his printer's apron, spilling cartridges on the floor in his eagerness to fill the magazine.

He spat at the mouse-hole with uncanny accuracy. "Wonder who in tarnation knocked off Bean," he said.

"Somebody out in the windmill lot," said Carson.

Jake picked up the cartridges he had dropped, put them back in the apron pocket again. "Kind of nice," he declared, "to know you got some backin'. Probably somebody that hates Fennimore's guts just as much as we do."

"Whoever he was," declared Carson, "he sure messed up my plans. No sense of trying to surrender now."

"Never was in the fust place," Jake told him. "Damndest fool thing I ever heard of. Steppin' out to get yourself shot up."

He squatted in the doorway, rifle across his knee.

"They didn't catch us unawares," he said. "Now they'll be up to something else. Thought maybe they'd wipe us out by shooting the place plumb full of holes." He patted the rifle stock. "Sort of discouraged them," he said.

"It'll be sniping now," declared Carson. "Waiting for one of us to show ourselves."

"And us," said Jake, "waiting for them to show themselves."

"They'll be spreading out," said Carson, "trying to come at us from different directions. We got to keep our eyes peeled. One of us watch from the front and the other from the back."

"Okay by me," said Jake. "Want to flip for it?"

"No time to flip," said Carson. "You take the back. I'll watch up here."

He glanced at the clock on the wall. "If we only can hold out until dark," he declared, "maybe—"

A FURTIVE tapping came against the back of the building.

"Who's there?" called out Jake, guardedly.

A husky whisper came through the boards. "Open up. It's me. Robinson."

The man slipped in, dragging his rifle behind him, when Jake eased the door open. The merchant slapped the dust from his clothes.

"So you're the jasper what hauled down on Bean," said Jake.

Robinson nodded. "They burned my store," he said. "So they could bust up your shop. They burned everything I had—for no reason at all except to let them get in here and stop that extra you were planning."

"That's what we figured, too," said Jake.

"I ain't no fighting man," Robinson declared. "I like things peaceable . . . like them peaceable so well I'll fight to make

them that way. That's why I shot Bean. That's why I came here. My way of figurin', there ain't no peace around these parts until we run out Fennimore."

"Instead of coming here," Carson told him, "you should have ridden out and told the ranchers what was happening. Told them we needed help."

"Lee Weaver is already out," said Robinson. "I was just over there. The stable boy told me he left half an hour ago."

A flurry of shots blazed from the North Star, and bullets chunked into the room. One of them, aimed higher than the rest, smashed the clock and it hung drunkenly from its nail, a wrecked thing that drooled wheels and broken spring.

"Just tryin' us out," said Jake.

To the north, far away, came the sound of shooting. They strained their ears, waiting. "Wonder what's going on up there?" asked Jake.

Robinson shook his head. "Sure hope it isn't Lee," he said.

After that one burst there were no further shots.

The sun climbed up the sky and the town dozed, its streets deserted.

"Everyone's staying under cover," Jake opined. "Ain't nobody wants to get mixed up in this."

Just after noon Lee Weaver came, flat on his belly through the weeds and tall grass back of the building, dragging himself along with one hand, the right arm dragging limply at his side, its elbow a bloody ruin bound with a red-stained handkerchief.

"Came danged near lettin' you have it," Jake told him. "Sneakin' through them weeds like a thievin' redskin."

Weaver slumped into a chair, gulped the dipper of water that Carson brought him.

"I couldn't get through," he told them. "Fennimore's got men posted all around the town, watching. Shot my horse, but I got away. Had to shoot it out with three of them. Laid for two hours in a clump of sage while they hunted me."

Carson frowned, worried. "That leaves us on the limb," he said. "There isn't any help coming. They got us cornered. Come night—"

"Come night," suggested Jake, "and we fade out of here. No use in tryin' it now. They'd get us sure as shootin'. In the dark we'd have some chance to get away."

Carson shook his head. "Come night," he declared, "I'm going into that saloon the back way. While you fellows keep them busy up here."

"If they don't get us first," Weaver reminded him. "They'll rush us as soon as it's dark."

"In that case," snapped Carson, "I'm starting now. That weed-patch out there is tall enough to shield a man if he goes slow, inches at a time, and doesn't cause too much disturbance. I'll circle wide before I try crossing the street. I'll be waiting to get into the North Star long before it's dark."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Plans of Mice and Men . . .

THE doorknob turned easily, and Carson let out his breath. For long hours he had lain back of the North Star, his mind conjuring up all the things that might go wrong. The door might be locked, he might be seen before he could reach it, he might run into someone just inside. . . .

But he reached the door without detection and now the knob turned beneath his fingers. He shoved it slowly, fearful of a squeaking hinge.

The smell of liquor and of stale cooking hit him in the face as the door swung open. From inside came the dull rumble of occasional words, the scrape of boot-heels.

Holding his breath, he moved inside, slid along the wall, shoved the door shut. Standing still, shoulders pressed against the wall, he waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the dark.

He was, he saw, in a sort of warehouse. Liquor cases and barrels were piled against the walls, half-blocking the lone window in the room. Straight ahead was another door and he guessed that it opened into a hallway that ran up to the barroom, with another room, the one in which he had faced Fennimore the night before, off to the side.

A gun crashed ahead of him. A single shot. And then another one. Then a flurry of shots.

He felt the hair crawl at the base of his scalp, and his grip tightened on the gun in his hand. There had been occasional firing all afternoon, a few shots now and then. This might be just another fusillade, or it

might mean that the kill had started, that the office would be rushed.

On tiptoe he moved across the room, reached the second door. And even as he reached for the knob, he felt it turn beneath his hand before his fingers gripped it.

Someone else had hold of the knob on the other side—was coming through the door!

Twisting on his boot-heel, he swung away, staggered back against the piled-up cases. The door swung open and a figure stepped into the room.

With all his strength, Carson swung at the head of the shadowy man, felt the barrel of his sixgun crash through the resistance of the hat, slam against the skull. The man gasped, pitched forward on buckling knees.

Moving swiftly, Carson scooped the guns from the holsters of the fallen man. He bent close to try to make out who it was, but in the dark the face was a white splotch, unrecognizable.

He straightened and stood tense, listening. There was no sound. No more shots from up in front.

He reached up to place the two guns he had taken from the holsters on top of the whisky cases, and as he stretched on tiptoe to shove them back away from the edge, something drilled into his back, something hard and round.

RIGID, he did not move, and a voice that he knew spoke just behind him.

"Well, well, Morgan, imagine finding you here."

Mocking, hard—the voice of Jackson Quinn. Quinn, hearing the thud of the falling body, coming on quiet feet down the hallway to investigate, catching him when he was off guard.

"Mind if I turn around?" asked Carson, trying to keep his voice easy.

Quinn gurgled with delight. "Not at all. Turn around by all means. I never did like shooting in the back." He chuckled again. "Not even you."

Carson twisted slowly around. The gun-muzzle never left his body, following it around from back to belly.

"Drop your gun," said Quinn.

Carson loosened his fingers and the gun thudded on the floor.

"You've given me so much trouble," Quinn told him, "that I should bust you up a bit. But I don't think I will. I don't think I'll even bother." He chuckled. "I think I'll just shoot you here and have it over with."

Iron squealed against iron, an eerie sound that leaped at them from the dark.

Quinn jerked around, and for the first time his gun-muzzle lifted from Carson's body.

Carson moved like lightning, clenched fist coming up and striking down, smashing against the wrist that held the gun; striking entirely by instinct, for it was too dark to see.

Quinn cried out and the gun clanged to the floor.

The back door was open. A figure stood outlined against the lesser dark outside, a crouching figure that carried a rifle at the ready.

Shoulders hunched, head down, one foot braced hard for leverage against the whisky cases, Carson hurled himself at Quinn. He felt the man go over at the impact of the blow, knew he was falling on top of him, hauled back his arm for a blow.

But a foot came up, lashing at his stomach. He sensed its coming, twisted, caught it in the ribs instead and went reeling back against the whisky cases, limp with pain.

Quinn was crouching, springing toward him. A fist exploded in his face, thumped his head against the cases. He ducked his head, ears ringing, and bored in, fists playing a tattoo on Quinn's midriff, driving the man out into the center of the room.

A vicious punch straightened Carson, rocked him. The white blur of Quinn's face was coming toward him and he aimed at it, smashed with all his might—and the face retreated as Quinn staggered backward on his heels.

Carson stepped in, and out of the dark came piledriver blows that shook him with their viciousness.

The face was there again. Carson measured it, brought his fist up almost from the floor in a whistling, singing loop. Pain lanced down his arm as the blow connected with the whiteness of the face and then the face was gone and Quinn was on the floor.

FEET were pounding in the hallway and shouts came from the barroom. Behind him a rifle crashed, thunderous in the closeness of the room, the red breath of its

muzzle lighting the place for a single instant.

The rifle crashed again and yet again and the room was full of powder-fumes that stung the nostrils.

"Jake!" yelled Carson.

"You bet your boots," said the man with the rifle. "You didn't think I'd let you do it all alone!"

"Quick!" gasped Carson. "Get in here, back by the door. They can't reach us here!"

A sixgun blasted and bullets chunked into the cases. Glass crashed and the reek of whisky mingled with the smell of gunsmoke.

Jake came leaping across the room, crouched in the angle back of the door.

Scraping his feet along the floor, Carson located his sixgun, picked it up.

Jake's whisper was rueful. "They got us bottled like a jug of rum."

Carson nodded in the dark. "Been all right," he said, "if Quinn hadn't found me."

"That Quinn you had the shindy with?"

"That's right."

"Had a mind to step in and do some work with the gunstock," Jake told him, "but decided it was too risky. Couldn't tell which of you was which."

Guns thundered in the passageway, the explosions deafening. Bullets thudded into the cases, chewing up the boards, smashing the bottles.

Carson reached up and grasped a case from those stacked behind him. Jake's rifle bellowed. Carson flung the case over his head. It smashed into the doorway. He heaved another one.

Jake blasted away again. The guns in the hallway cut off.

"Keep watch," Carson told Jake. He heaved more cases in the doorway, blocking it to shoulder-height.

From across the street came the sound of firing—the ugly snarling of a high-powered rifle.

"That's Robinson," said Jake. "Some of them buzzards tried to sneak out the front door and come at us from behind, but Robinson was Johnny at the rat-hole."

"Robinson can't stop them for long," snapped Carson. "They'll get at us in a minute or two—"

A gun hammered almost in their ears and something stabbed Carson in the face. He brushed at it with his hand, pulled away a splinter. The gun roared again, as if it were just beside their heads.

"They're in the back room," gasped Jake, "shooting at us through the partition!"

"Quick!" yelled Carson. "We got to get out of here! Here, you grab Quinn and haul him out. I'll take the other fellow."

He grasped the man he had struck down with the gun-barrel, started to tug him toward the door.

"Why don't we leave 'em here?" yelped Jake. "What in tarnation is the sense of luggin' 'em?"

"Don't argue with me," yelled Carson. "Just get Quinn out of here."

The gun in the back room was hammering, was joined by another. Through the holes already punched by the bullets, Carson could see the red flare of the blasting guns. One of the bullets brushed past Carson's face, buried itself with a thud in the stacked cases. Another flicked burning across his ribs.

SAVAGELY he yanked the door open, hauled his man through and dumped him on the ground. Reaching in, he gave the panting, puffing Jake a hand with Quinn.

"Pull them a bit farther away," said Carson. "We don't want them to get scorched."

"Scorched?" yipped Jake. Now you're plumb out of your head!"

"I said scorched," declared Carson, "and I mean scorched. Things are going to get hot in the next five minutes."

He plunged his hand into a pocket, brought out a match, scratched it across the seat of his breeches. For a moment he held it in his cupped hand, nursing the flame, then with a flip of his fingers sent it sailing into the whisky-reeking room.

The flame sputtered for a moment on the floor, almost went out, then blazed brilliantly, eating its way along a track of liquor flowing from one of the broken cases.

Carson lit another match, hurled it into the room. The blaze puffed rapidly, leaping along the floor, climbing the cases, snapping and snarling.

Carson turned and ran, Jake pelting at his heels. In the long grass back of the North Star they flung themselves prone, and watched.

The single window in the building was an angry maw of fire, and tiny tongues of flame were pushing their way through the shingled roof.

A man leaped from one of the side windows in a shower of broken glass. Beside Carson, almost in his ear, Jake's rifle bellowed. The man's hat, still on his head despite the leap, was whipped off as if by an unseen hand.

From the *Tribune* office across the street came the flickering of blasting guns, covering the front windows and the door of the burning saloon.

"Listen!" hissed Jake. His hand reached out and grasped Carson by the shoulder. "Horses!"

It was horses—there could be no mistaking that. The thrum of hoofs along the dusty street—the whoop of a riding man, then a crash of thunder as sixguns cut loose.

Men were spilling out of the North Star now, running men with guns blazing in their hands. And down upon them swept the riders, yelling, sixguns tonguing flame.

The riders swept past the North Star, whirled and came back, and in their wake they left quiet figures lying in the dust.

Jake was on his knee, rifle at his shoulder, firing steadily at the running, dodging figures scurrying for cover.

A running man dashed around the corner of the flaming saloon, ducked into the broken, weedy ground back of the jail. For a moment the light of the fire swept across his face and in that moment, Carson recognized him.

It was Fennimore! Fennimore, making a getaway. .

Carson leaped to his feet, crouched low and ran swiftly in the direction Fennimore had taken. Ahead of him a gun barked and a bullet sang like an angry bee above his head.

For an instant he saw a darting darker shape in the shadows and brought up his own gun, triggered it swiftly. Out of the darkness, Fennimore's gun answered and the bullet, traveling low, whispered wickedly in the knee-high grass.

Carson fired at the gun-flash, and at the same instant something jerked at his arm and whirled him half-around. Staggering, his boot caught in a hummock and he went down, plowing ground with his shoulder.

HE TRIED to put out his arm to help himself up again and he found he couldn't. His right arm wouldn't move. It was a dead thing hanging on him, a dead thing that was numb, almost as if it were not a part of him.

Pawing in the grass with his left hand, he found the gun and picked it up, while dull realization beat into his brain.

Running after Fennimore, he'd been outlined against the burning North Star, had been a perfect target. Fennimore had shot him through the arm, perhaps figured he had killed him when he saw him stumble.

Crouching in the grass, he raised his head cautiously. But there was nothing but darkness.

Behind him the saloon's roof fell in with a gush of flames and for a moment the fire leaped high, twisting in the air. And in that moment he saw Fennimore on a rise of ground above him. The man was standing there, looking at the flames.

Carson surged to his feet.

"Fennimore!" he shouted.

The man spun toward him, and for an instant the two stood facing one another in the flare of the gutted building.

Then Fennimore's gun was coming up and to Carson it was almost as if he stood off to one side and watched with cold, deliberate, almost scientific interest.

But he knew his own hand was coming up, too, the left hand with the feel of the gun a bit unfamiliar in it.

Fennimore's gun drooled fire and something brushed with a blast of air past Carson's cheek. Then Carson's gun bucked against his wrist, and bucked again.

On the rise of ground, in the dying light of the sinking fire, Fennimore doubled over slowly. And across the space of the few feet that separated them, Carson heard him coughing, coughs wrenched out of his chest. The man pitched slowly forward, crashed face-first into the grass.

Slowly, Carson turned and walked down to the street, his wounded arm hanging at his side, blood dripping from his dangling fingers.

The guns were quiet. The fire was dying down. Black, grotesque figures still lay huddled in the dust. In front of the *Tribune* office the horses milled, and inside the office someone had lighted a lamp.

Voices yelled at him as he stepped up on

the board sidewalk and headed for the office. He recognized some of the voices. Owens, Kelton, Ross—the men who had ridden away the night before, afraid of what might happen to their homes.

Owens was striding down the walk to meet him. He stared at Carson's bloody arm.

"Fennimore plugged me," Carson said.

"Fennimore got away. He isn't here."

"He's out back of the jail," Carson told him.

"We're glad we got here in time," said Owens, gravely. "Glad we came to our senses. The boys feel pretty bad about last night. It took Miss Delavan to show us—"

"Miss Delevan?" asked Carson, dazed. "What did Kathryn have to do with it?"

Owens looked surprised. "I thought you knew. She rode out and told us."

"But Fennimore had guards posted!"

"She outrode them," Owens declared. "They didn't shoot at her. Guess even a Fennimore gunman doesn't like to gun a woman. They took out after her, but she was on that little Star horse of hers—"

"Yes, I know," said Carson. "Star can outrun anything on four legs."

"She told us how it was our chance to make a decent land out here, a decent place to live—a decent place for our kids."

"Where is she now?" asked Carson. "You made her stay behind. You—"

Owens shook his head. "She wouldn't listen to us. Nothing doing but she'd ride along with us. She said her father—"

"You left her at the house?"

Owens nodded. "She said—"

But Carson wasn't listening. He wasn't even staying. He stepped down into the street and walked away, his stride changing in a moment to a run.

"Kathryn!" he cried.

She was running down the street toward him, arms outstretched.

Jake, prodding Quinn and Clay Duffy toward the *Tribune* at rifle-point, saw them when they met. He watched interestedly, and spat judiciously in the dust.

"Beats all hell," he told Quinn, "how that feller gets along with women."

THE END

WOOLLIES MEAN WAR!

FROM the beginning, an unbridgeable gulf lay between the cowboy and the sheepherder. The puncher lived a hard, vigorous, reckless life on the open plains, fighting his battle against the elements with a hardy zest. His enemy lived a lonely, monotonous existence, often becoming sullen and mystical. To the cowboy, he seemed a creature of a different race.

The grazing habits of their widely-differing charges were one of the main causes of dissension between them. Cattle grazed by looping bunches of grass into their mouths with their long, muscular tongues and wandered erratically, leaving much of the grass intact. Sheep, more gregarious, grazed in compact bunches, biting off the grass at its roots, or below if they desired, with their sharp incisors and split upper lips. Their edged little hoofs cut up the sod and pounded it hard, leaving desolation in their wake. Such ruined land was called "sheeped off" by the exasperated cattlemen.

Sheep wars took a huge toll of men and animals before they finally burnt themselves out. All sorts of atrocities were inflicted upon the unfortunate herders to prevent their spreading through the West.

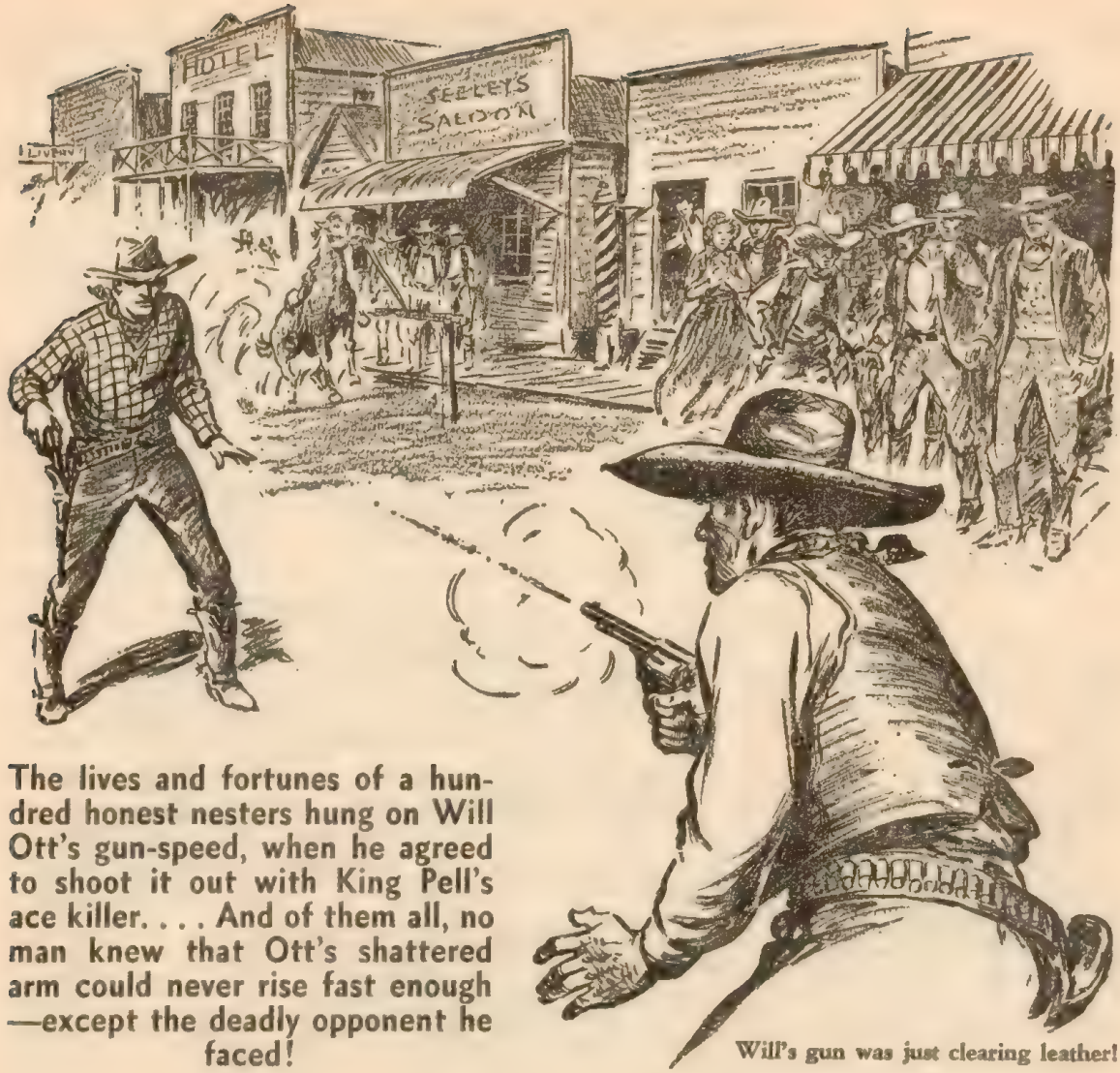
One of the last of these sanguinary outbreaks was committed in the Ten Sleep country in 1909. Joe Allemand, a sheepman from Casper, Wyoming, had made camp on No Water Creek. With him were Joseph Emge, his camp mover, and Jules Lazier, a herder.

The three men were asleep by the fire when a band of men crept up on them and coldly shot them as they lay. Piling their bodies on the camp dunnage, the killers burned the whole heap. Then they turned on the sheep and destroyed hundreds, driving off the rest.

The Wyoming Wool Growers Association offered large rewards for the arrest of the murderers. Seven Ten Sleep country cowboys were arrested on evidence gathered by range detectives. Two of them turned state's evidence, and the others were convicted of crimes ranging from murder to arson, and sent to the state penitentiary.

Thus ended one of the last incidents in the long-drawn-out war against the sheepherders. With it, the feuds dwindled and to the rangelands of the West came legal grazing regulations —and bigger fences!

—Chester B. Conant.



The lives and fortunes of a hundred honest nesters hung on Will Ott's gun-speed, when he agreed to shoot it out with King Pell's ace killer. . . . And of them all, no man knew that Ott's shattered arm could never rise fast enough —except the deadly opponent he faced!

Will's gun was just clearing leather!

SLOW DRAW—SUDDEN GRAVE!

By H. A. DE ROSSO

WILL OTT was in Seeley's bar, having a quick one, when King Pell walked in with Frank Leatherman. Ott had been talking with Herb Bates, whose quarter-section lay next to Ott's, but his voice died when he saw the two.

The men exchanged nods, and Jeff Seeley's voice sounded very loud in the silence. "What'll it be, boys?"

Pell and Leatherman ordered whisky, and then it was quiet again. Will stared out the open door at the bright sunlight that filled the main street of Rincon. He could see his wagon and team in front of Masterson's Mercantile. His wife, Susan, was in the store, and she should be done any minute now and then he'd be driving home.

Staring out into the sunlight and seeing everything so alive and clean doubled the distaste in his mouth. He said, "Let's go, Herb."

Bates nodded. They were making for the door when King Pell said, in his heavy way,

"A word with you, Ott. You, too, Bates."

They stopped and turned, waiting for Pell to speak. He stood with his back to the bar—tall and heavy, his dark face impassive, his right hand playing with the golden watch-chain across his vest. His black eyes watched the two men.

"What's on your mind?" Ott asked tensely. He was tall and slim, and there was a slow grace to all his movements that belied the quickness in him. That was a pose. Knowing his own quickness in his every thought, in his laughter, in his anger, he made it a point to be slow and easy about things. But there were times when he forgot his caution. And now, glancing at Frank Leatherman's tied-down .45, Will hoped that this would not be one of those times.

"We have our differences, gentlemen," King Pell said blandly. "How about settling them once and for all?"

"Go on," Ott said.

"You know I want Indian Valley," Pell said. "I need that land. I'm going into the cattle business on a big scale. When I bought the LL brand six months ago, I said I'd build it into the biggest iron in the state. If I'm going to run more cows, I'll need more graze."

He took a cigar out of a vest pocket, bit off the tip, and lit the cigar. Leatherman was leaning with his elbows on the bar. His attitude suggested that he was totally uninterested in what was happening, but Will Ott knew better. Frank Leatherman didn't draw top gun-wages from Pell for nothing.

PELL said, through a cloud of tobacco-smoke, "I've offered to buy you fellows out, but you won't sell. Right?"

"Right!"

"I still want that land," Pell said slowly, heavily. "You know what that shapes up to."

"Yeh, I know," Ott said, and quick anger started to seeth in him. He glanced at Frank Leatherman, and knew a moment of fear. Not for himself—he was used to the ways of violence. That had been his life, until almost two years ago, when a bullet had smashed his right elbow, bringing to it a lingering stiffness and slowness that had written finish to his days as a gunfighter.

He was afraid for Herb Bates and those other farmers whose green acres filled Indian Valley. Ott knew what was coming. He'd lived through the bloody days of Johnson County. He knew the death and destruction King Pell could bring when he turned his hired gunmen loose.

So Ott's anger died, under the coldness that crept into him.

Pell's eyes were narrowed. "You're the kingpin in Indian Valley, Ott. I reckon you've done more than anyone else to keep those farmers from sellin' out to me."

Ott said quietly, "You just don't understand, Pell. We're not holding out for money. Indian Valley's our home. The land is ours, it means a lot to us. You can't understand because you have too much land. If you had only a little, that you worked with your own hands, that you lived from, you'd know why we'll fight for Indian Valley, and die for it."

Pell was silent a while. Then he said, "So you'll die for it? That's kind of silly, isn't it, Ott? What good is your land to you when you're dead?"

"I'm not here to argue," Will said hotly. Frank Leatherman turned now for the first time, and stared at him. "If you've got something to say, say it!"

"All right," Pell said. "I've got a proposition. Instead of a lot of bloodshed, let's settle for a little. Frank here will rep for me, and you for the farmers, Ott. You were a gunfighter before you retired—one of the best. Frank will take you on. You win, Indian Valley is yours and I'll never bother you again. Frank wins, and the farmers promise to sell out to me."

He paused, and his stare was hot and heavy on Will. "If you're not afraid. . ." he said.

THAT evening, before he left for the meeting which Herb Bates said he'd arrange, Will Ott told his Susan about it. She listened quietly, as was her way, but he could read the pain in her brown eyes.

"That's how it is, Susan," he finished. "Pell and Leatherman know I'm through as a gunfighter. How they found out, I can't understand. I've kept it to myself. Only you and I and that doctor in Laramie know the truth."

"What are you going to do, Will?"

"I don't know."

"You'll have to tell them at the meeting tonight. You'll have to tell them you can't go against Leatherman. You wouldn't have a chance."

"I know," he said wistfully. "But if I did have! If I had my old gun-speed again. . ."

"Please, Will. Please don't talk like that."

"I could save so many lives—"

She began to cry, and he took her face between his hands and kissed her. "There, now, Susan," he said gently, "I was just wishing. Wishing that things were different. You should have seen Herb Bates afterward. I've never seen him so happy since all this trouble started. To him, the fight was as good as won. Me, the great Will Ott, the fastest gun-thrower north of the Rio! I was a cinch to win!"

He laughed bitterly. "I didn't have the heart to dash all his hopes. Now I've got to tell him anyhow, and it won't be an easy job. Maybe they'll think I'm scared and backing down. Maybe they'll say I'm yellow."

"But you haven't a chance, Will!"

"I know," he said. "I haven't one little chance, Susan. So I'll have to tell them tonight. It will be hell, but I'll tell them."

On the ride home he ran what he was going to say to Susan over and over in his mind. He hoped fervently that she would understand. She had always understood his motives in anything without his having to explain, and that was the strongest bond between them. But would she understand this time?

His steps were heavy on the gravel pathway leading to the door. He paused a moment with his hand on the latch, then he opened the door and stepped inside.

She was seated in the rocker, reading. She watched him silently as he removed his coat and hat and hung them up. Walking over behind her, he took the back of the rocker in his two hands and squeezed until his knuckles showed white. He looked down at her, at the way the lamplight brought out the red gold in her hair and he bent his head swiftly, kissing her.

"Susan," he said achingly. "I'm a damn' fool, Susan!"

She gave a little cry. "Will?" she said. "Didn't you tell them?"

He spoke slowly, bitterly. "I intended to. I got up on my feet and I was going to tell them. But I looked over their faces and then I realized one thing I'd forgotten. Their kids.

"Herb Bates has five. Nels Erickson has six. There's a lot of kids in the Valley, Susan. We haven't a chance against Pell. I never wanted to admit it but now I've got to. These farmers are no match for Pell's hired guns. None of them would have a chance against Pell's killers.

"I got Herb Bates and Erickson and all the others to agree to sell out to Pell if I fall. They're certain I won't, which is why they agreed, but I know they'll keep their word. It's the only way out, Susan. . . ."

THEY met in one of the back rooms of Jeff Seeley's bar. There were King Pell and Frank Leatherman, Will Ott and Herb Bates. King Pell was all smugness. The cigar in his mouth bobbed up and down when he spoke.

"Then it's all settled," he said to Ott. "Tonight at seven, you and Leatherman meet right here in front of Seeley's. Winner take all. Have all the witnesses you want —the more the better. No crooked work. Right out in the open. Better than a bloody range-war, eh?"

"Sure," Will Ott said. He turned to Bates. "You go on, Herb."

Bates' face registered his puzzlement.

"I'm gonna wait in town," Ott explained. "You go gather all the others that want to be here. Tell them at seven sharp."

Bates shrugged. "Sure, Will," he said, and went out.

Ott's black-handled .45 felt awkward and heavy and out of place. It had been two years since his waist had known the heavy sag of a filled shell-belt.

He dropped his right hand on the handle of his gun and let his gray eyes pass slowly over Pell's and Leatherman's faces. There was a touch of gloating and triumph deep in Pell's eyes. Leatherman's features mirrored nothing.

"I want to talk to the two of you," Ott said.

Pell drew heavily on his cigar. "I thought everything was settled."

"Yeah. Everything we talked about. But there's something we haven't talked about."

"And what's that?"

Ott jerked a thumb at the gunman.

"Leatherman. I know his rep. He never tackled anything but a sure thing."

Leatherman scowled. "What do you mean?"

"You must be awfully sure of winning, else you wouldn't take me on," Ott told him levelly.

Pell flushed. "Are you hinting I'm not playing fair?" he demanded.

"Oh, it'll be a fair fight. It'll all be out in the open—just between me and Leatherman. But I've got a pretty good rep as a gun-thrower, Pell. A better one than Leatherman's. Seems strange you'd back a second-rater!"

Leatherman cursed. "I'll show you who's a second-rater!"

Pell waved a hand. "Take it easy, Frank. I think our Mr. Ott has a little game up his sleeve. Isn't that right, Ott?"

"I'll let you figure that out," Ott said.

He turned his gaze back to Leatherman. Hatred blazed in the eyes of the gunman, and hate was etched in all the lines of his wind-burned face.

"You'll eat those words, Ott. Dammit to hell, but you'll eat 'em! Remember Kid Bisbee?"

Ott started a little. Sure, he remembered Kid Bisbee. That had been Will Ott's last gunfight. He'd downed young Bisbee, but not before the Kid had put a bullet in Ott's arm, smashing his elbow.

Pell said, "Frank."

LEATHERMAN growled, "You stay out of this, King. It's my turn to talk now. Can't you see he smells a rat? So let him know. Let him stew in the knowledge until seven. He won't back out. His pride won't let him."

Leatherman's laugh was cold and hard. "Sure, you remember Kid Bisbee, Ott. Only his real name was Leatherman, Bob Leatherman, my brother. You killed him, Ott, but he winged you. I've been on your trail for two years. You hid out on a farm, thinking no one would look for Will Ott among a bunch of broken-down farmers.

"I've been inquiring a lot about you, Ott. In two years I've learned a lot. I talked to a doctor in Laramie. He didn't want to say much at first—but I kind of persuaded him to talk. That clear, Ott? That enough?"

Will Ott couldn't say anything. He'd suspected this all along, but the confirmation left him momentarily stunned. He could only stand there, hand tight about the handle of his gun, that quick anger running all through him.

Pell hissed, "You fool, Frank."

"Watch what you say, King," Leatherman flared. "Watch what you say."

"But why did you have to spill it now?"

"I know what I'm doing. He won't back out." Leatherman's lips twisted in a derisive grin. "Think of the women and kids! That's what he's doing. And I want him to know in advance he hasn't got a chance. I want him to have that in mind when I empty my gun into him."

Will had fought down his anger. He said quietly, "Maybe it'll be just the other way around, Frank."

Laughing, Leatherman shook his head. "I don't bluff easy, Ott."

"There are other doctors," Ott went on quietly. "Better doctors than the one in Laramie."

He saw doubt flash over the gunman's face. Only for a moment, then Leatherman was laughing derisively again. "I don't bluff, and I don't scare!"

"I'm not a complete damn' fool," Ott said viciously. "You think I'd deliberately die for a bunch of nesters?"

Doubt returned to the gunman's face. He licked his lips. "You're scared," he said, the derisiveness gone from his tone. "You're scared, and you're tryin' to run a bluff."

Will said, his voice on edge, "If you think I'm running a bluff, Frank, go ahead and pull. Pull your gun. Let's get it over with. A few seconds and you'll know if I'm bluffing!"

Pell sprang between them. "Take it easy, Frank! Take it easy. Can't you see? He's trying to get you to show your hand. There's no witnesses here but me. He thinks he can put one over. He knows if something happens to him in here, there'll be trouble. Those farmers would never take that lying down. So don't get riled, Frank. Let Ott shoot off his damn' mouth. He won't do much talking after seven tonight. He'll do none at all!"

THOUGH he had asked her not to come, Susan drove into town that evening. It was a half-hour before seven when she

arrived. Will Ott was in Masterson's Mercantile where the farmers had gathered. They understood and drifted away, leaving Will and his wife alone in the rear of the store.

Susan was hesitant. "I—I had to come, Will," she said.

He smiled. "I know. I wish you hadn't, but I'm glad you came."

Worry lay in the crease of her brow. "How does it go, Will?"

He would not look at her. Lifting his hand, he wiped the beads of sweat off his upper lip. His voice was grim.

"Not so good," he admitted. "I've been trying for two hours. The elbow is just as slow and stiff as ever."

"Oh, Will!" she said, and began to cry.

His face was drawn. "Please, Susan," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said and her sobs gradually ceased. "You've enough on your mind without my carrying on like this."

"I've got a chance, Susan," he said. "I really think I have. I've got Leatherman doubting. Maybe he'll be rattled and unsteady. It isn't who gets off the first shot that counts, if it's a miss. I really got a chance, Susan, and that's all I need!"

He hoped he sounded genuine, for Susan's sake. And also for himself. It went against his grain to admit he was whipped.

He glanced up to find Herb Bates approaching. Bates' face was pale. He said, "It's almost time, Will." Will thanked him, and Bates moved back to the front of the store.

Will looked down at Susan. He tried grinning again. "Well, this is it," he said. "Do you understand?"

"I do understand, Will, I do!" She was in his arms, crying softly, and her voice came through her tears.

Herb Bates' voice came from the front of the store. "Time, Will."

They walked together toward the front of the store. Herb Bates was waiting there.

"Everything set?" Will asked.

Bates nodded. "Just like you said, Will."

Will said, "Good." He wasn't taking any chances. When he'd seen Pell's gunmen filing into town, Will had instructed Bates to post farmers at vantage points, in case Pell started trouble.

"Cover Seeley's," Will had ordered. "And cover the Cinco House, too. Don't pass up a trick. First sign of any funny stuff, go to it. Pell might not keep his word if he loses, so be ready for him. But if we lose, you keep your word, Herb. I'm expecting that."

Will glanced across the street and saw that Leatherman had not made his appearance yet. Will looked down at Susan. A forced smile came to his lips. "Be seein' you," he said softly.

"Sure, Will," she said. "Be seein' you, . . ."

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He looked up and saw Leatherman stepping out of Seeley's, followed by King Pell. Will loosened the gun in its holster and stepped off the boardwalk into the dirt of the street. The sun had just set, and the air was taking on its first chill. All about him was a heavy silence, like an enveloping veil, and he could feel the pound of his heart.

He looked about him, taking in everything one last time. The long flow of Rincon's main street, the weathered buildings on either side. The striped post in front of the barber shop . . . the Indian image outside of the cigar store . . . the canvas awning that shaded the front of the Rincon Drug Store. . . .

Then he turned his head briefly to look at Susan. She was standing there, watching him, and as their eyes met, she smiled and lifted one hand in a little gesture of encouragement. Will broke his gaze then, turning his attention to Leatherman, aware that the gunman had caught Susan's gesture and was all the more nettled by it.

Will ran his left hand over his eyes, trying to wipe the images out of his mind. The sound of Susan's voice, the color of her hair, red-gold in the sun, the whiteness of her smile. All those things that would no longer be his. The memory of her warm, firm body in his arms. That was all past and irrevocable.

And instead of regret and sadness, he felt a hot anger rushing through him.

FRANK LEATHERMAN was walking slowly, right hand poised over the handle of his gun. Behind him, on the walk, stood big King Pell, watching, hand playing with the golden watch-chain strung across his vest.

The gunman's face was gray, Will saw. All his arrogance was gone. The man was scared, Will thought. Scared yellow. And Will groaned inwardly. If only he possessed just one little vestige of his old gun-speed— But he had nothing, nothing at all.

Still he forced a reckless smile to his face, saying, "There are other doctors than the one in Laramie, Leatherman."

He saw the man wince, fear flash across his face. He glanced once, quickly, to where Susan stood, calm and confident. Then Leatherman drew. Fear had accelerated rather than slowed his draw. His gun whipped free of holster, began to roar.

Will's gun was just clearing leather. He'd not been wrong. He was slow, woefully slow. But there was a prayer on his lips. Leatherman's gun was flaming. Twice he fired, and all Will felt was a lone tug at his shirt-sleeve.

Leatherman's frantic hurry had disrupted his accuracy. Will's gun was free and level now. He prayed. *Let him miss once more.*

Leatherman fired again—and didn't miss. The impact shivered Will and the shock left him numb so that for a moment he did not know where the bullet had struck.

He had no time to figure it out, for his own gun was bucking against his palm even as he felt another bullet hit.

He knew he was staggering, weaving blindly, trying to reach the walk and Masterson's Mercantile. He thought he had seen Leatherman fall. There was thunder in Will's ears, like the furious popping of many guns, but his mind was reeling.

He tried to fight off the blackness, stumbling along, whispering, "Susan? Where are you, Susan?"

Then the darkness came and he was falling, endlessly. . . .

When he awoke, in Masterson's home behind the store, Herb Bates told him all about it.

"Pell is through," Bates finished. "He put up quite a fight, but we came out on top. I got Pell myself. When his hired guns saw that the boss was dead, they quit cold. Indian Valley is ours, Will!"

"How— How many hurt?"

"Only three. None very bad. You got it worst of all, Will, but the doc says you'll pull out of it easy. I thought you was a goner when Leatherman beat you to the draw so easy, but he was way wild. You weren't. Straight through the heart—"

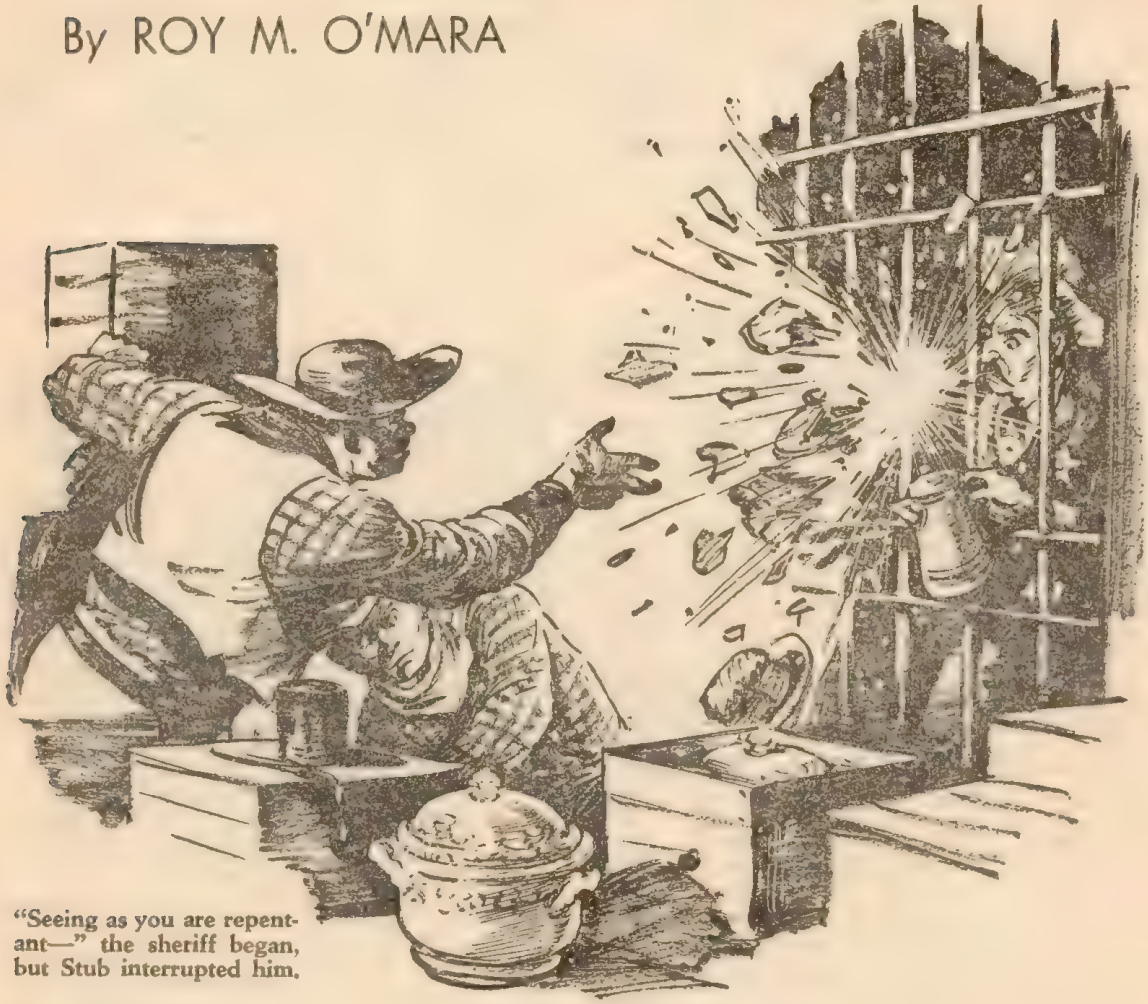
"Thanks, Herb," Will said, and Bates went out of the room, leaving him alone with Susan. She nestled her cheek against his, and some of the pain left his body. He found he could smile.

"It wasn't so bad, was it, Susan?"

She turned her face so that he might not see her tears. "No, Will," she whispered, "It wasn't so bad—and from now on it will be very good, for all of us."

Crazy Springs' Write-In Vote

By ROY M. O'MARA



"Seeing as you are repentant—" the sheriff began, but Stub interrupted him.

UNMINDFUL of three stealthy figures approaching from behind, Stub Woffard studied the panorama before him with back braced against a saddle bag and scuff-toed boots extended toward the embers of a brush-root fire. In the glare of a late September sunset, there was little to set Crazy Springs apart from a hundred other places he had visited during a long and idle career—unless it was a small weatherbeaten structure across from the stone courthouse. It was a two-story, shiplapped building, without the usual false front, topped by a big square water tank bearing the red-painted sign: "Two Handled Crockery Items (With Lid)—Bolivar Sneed, Owner." It meant nothing to Stub Woffard.

"All right," a nasal voice boomed out behind him, "grab 'im, boys!"

Stub used one hand to help whirl a short body from the ground. The other was whistling in a vicious arc before he saw the big nickel-plated star on a hump-backed man at one side.

Before he could stop himself, Stub's fist connected with a hairy jaw and cracked like a board on a pack mule's rump.

In durance vile for a crime he'd never heard of, Stub Woffard took cards in a strange game—whose object was, not to take the pot—but to get rid of it! A hilarious tale of the most unorthodox frontier election ever held!

Stub gasped. "Par'n me!" he gulped, as the bewhiskered victim landed on his neck. "Lawmen usually approach me from in front, formal-like. Don't tell me I'm arrested for somethin'."

"You shore are!" snapped the hump-shouldered man. He motioned with a skinny hand for the remaining man to relieve Stub of his gun. "Never mind what for—move!"

"But my hoss!" Stub protested. "An' my outfit—"

"Move!" the sharp-faced official fluted through a hooked nose. "Deputy McFootle will take care of that, when he wakes up."

As Stub stumbled along ahead of the escorting lawmen, he realized that he should have been more cautious in his approach. It wasn't that he had not been forewarned. Didn't the most road-hardened boomers get red in the face, confused and silent at the mere mention of Crazy Springs?

And what had become of his own partner, Boxcar Bailey, who had left Reno two months before for the avowed purpose of figuring prominently in local poker games? He hadn't been heard from since. Now Stub could see that the sprawling, wind-swept town kept its secrets well.

A KEROSENE lamp was burning in the cluttered office of the justice of the peace when Stub and his convoy reached the dusty street. As they entered, he noticed that the dirty-eared judge was blotting fresh ink on a complaint form, and was puzzled.

"Name?" the judge croaked.

Stub hesitated a split second. "Jimmy Smith," he answered, pulling his floppy hat from a gleaming bald head.

The judge scratched the name in the space provided on the form. "Jimmy Smith," he read rapidly, "you are accused by this complaint of the crime of mopery, committed as follows: That on or about this date, in or around the county of Blackfoot, over, around or upon the township of Crazy Springs, you, the defendant, wilfully and wantonly with malice aforethought, did deliberately and intentionally mope against the peace and dignity of this state. . . ."

Stub shifted his feet. "It's this way, Judge," he said, "Yuh see—"

"Guilty as charged!" snapped the judge. "Thirty days in the county jail!" He blew out the light, and Stub, marveling at the speed of local justice, was propelled roughly across the street. They went up the courthouse stairs and into a smoke-filled sheriff's office, where six more deputies made themselves comfortable on a rickety counter, a spur-marked desk and a cigarette-littered floor. The sheriff fumbled with his jail keys.

"Convention?" Stub inquired amiably, "or just a hold-over from th' Fourth of July?"

"Shet up!" a deputy admonished as he hoisted Stub through the door of the adjoining jail.

The steel door clanged shut. Then a match flared, illuminating a big arm stretched from a steel bunk at the far side of the cell. The match touched the wick of a candle stuck in a bottle. Even before Stub's eyes were entirely accustomed to the gloom, he could see piled cases along one wall and a cluttered table near the jail door. There was a strong smell of fresh paint.

"Mopery," he mumbled. "I've been in jail for a lot o' things—but never mopery. Must be somethin' like arson."

"Stub!" a joyous voice yelled as the other occupant of the cell rolled from the bunk. "I'd know that voice in hell!"

"Boxcar!" Stub yelped. "Boxcar Bailey! How long you been here?"

"Shhh!" Boxcar Bailey warned. "Don't let them stool-pigeons hear nothin'". He pulled jeans over muscle-knotted legs and thrust sockless feet into cold boots. "I been in about two months."

THEY made a strange pair—Stub being hammered-down, smooth in features, action and speech, while Boxcar Bailey was a slow-witted, rough, battered-faced ex-prize fighter. Moreover, he was built big enough to get Stub Woffard out of many scrapes with his hamlike fists or ready gun. Not that Stub was a slouch, but the diminutive loafer was prone to bite off more than he could chew at times. It was a convenient tie-up.

Stub twisted a brown-paper cigarette and leaned on the opposite bunk. "When yuh due out?" he wanted to know.

"About thirty more days," Boxcar Bailey replied mournfully. "This makes th' second time my sentence has been upped."

"Howcome?" Stub inquired.

Boxcar was silent for a moment. In the light of the flickering candle Stub could see the big man's face flush and his lips tremble.

"Yesterday," he blurted out at last, "I dropped another—item—and they gave me thirty days more!"

"I don't get it," Stub said. "What d'yuh mean, *item?*"

Boxcar indicated the cases piled high against the far wall and several objects now visible on the table, beside paint cans and brushes. "Them things," he explained, "is items. I has tuh stencil red roses an' bronc-busters on 'em—an' so will you."

"Why?"

"Because," Boxcar said, "nobody in their right mind will stoop low enough to be a item painter, an' as Sheriff Bolivar Sneed owns th' Two-Handled Crockery Items—With Lid—Company acrost th' street, he manages tuh keep fellers in jail tuh keep up on th' paintin'. Why, even them sheep-herdin' bums he has workin' for 'im won't paint items!"

Stub held one of the finished products to the yellow candlelight. Two curving handles, an ornate lid and a scalloped base adorned the pumpkin-shaped crockery piece. On one side of the receptacle there were stenciled red roses, and on the other a red bronc-buster astride a plunging horse. Underneath were the words: "A Handle To Spare!"

"Now," Stub said slowly, "I see it all! No wonder th' boomers wouldn't talk about Crazy Springs—they was ashamed of paintin' these dingblasted—"

"Shhh!" Boxcar interrupted. "You're talkin' too loud. Call 'em Two-Handled Crockery Items—With Lid. If Sheriff Sneed hears yuh call 'em anything else, he cuts off th' grub, soap an' tobaccy!"

Crash! A two-handled item, given steaming impetus by Stub's full-armed swing, shattered against the jail door and threw powdered white crockery all over the lounging officials. "You've lost your fightin' spirit, Boxcar!" Stub yelled. "This is a dirty deal!" And he let drive with another festooned piece.

Wildly Sheriff Bolivar Sneed came to his feet, clawing fragments of porcelain from shirt collar and eyes. "Every time you break a two-handled crockery item—with lid—" he trumpeted through his adenoids—"you'll get thirty days more!"

Crash!

"That makes ninety days!" the sheriff roared.

Crash! Crash! Crash! Three deputies stuck for a moment amid the ankle-deep litter as they rushed the outer door. "You'll *never* get out!" the sheriff screamed.

"Why, you long-nosed, whining, ring-boned billy-goat," Stub raved as Boxcar grabbed wildly at him, "We'll be outa here within a week, an' you'll cuss th' day you ever heard of a—"

"Two-handled crockery item—with lid!" the sheriff shrieked. "And besides that—have those items in there painted by tomorrow night, or you'll get no food, tobacco or soap!"

"Blub!" Stub observed, with Boxcar's hamlike hand clamped over his twisting face.

THE light went out in the sheriff's office and Boxcar let go. "Stub," he pleaded, "for th' love o' Pete, take it easy or we'll never get out o' here. This jail is breakproof—I know."

Pent-up air from within rumbled deep in Stub's throat. "What's th' all-fired hurry about gettin' this stuff done?" he asked, pacing up and down the length of the stone enclosure.

Boxcar sagged to the steel bunk and ran worried fingers through his tangled black hair. "Campaign stuff," he muttered. "Him an' his deppities takes three-four wagon-loads out a couple o' days afore each election an' gives a two-handled item tuh each voter."

The light of unholy inspiration rested on the cherubic features of Stub Woffard. "Tell me more about this election stuff," he said, shoving his head through the barred window.

The courthouse door, he noted, was under the jail window. There was an occasional glare of light from a false-fronted business house, and a high-riding moon cast a shadow of the Two-Handled Crockery Item—With Lid—building, in the street before him.

"Nothin' much to th' election," Boxcar Bailey summed up. "This feller Sneed has been in for years. All th' stinkin' bums he has workin' for 'im acrost th' street is dep-

pities. They all get out an' campaign, an' a couple of 'em usual runs agin 'im tuh bust up any opposin' vote. A lotta people is sick o' him, but they don't know what tuh do."

STUB pulled his head back into the jail. "C'mon, Boxcar," he said, "we got t' get about twenty feet o' wire spliced together off th' tag ends of th' balin' wires around these cases. Might be a day or two before we can use it, but we'll be ready tuh go when things is right."

Boxcar came up standing. "Go?" he said. "Go where?"

"Spring out," Stub grunted. "Jailbreak—nuthin' to it."

Boxcar was jubilant. "Tuhnight?" he asked.

"Nope," Stub replied. "We gotta do this legal—I don't know how much of a crime mopery is, but we can't afford tuh have this ol' snaggle-toothed bum advertisin' us from Anaconda tuh El Paso."

"How yuh goin' t' get around it?" Boxcar asked.

"Simple—just get elected sheriff," Stub replied, flipping a cigarette through the window. "They can't keep a sheriff or his deppity in jail, can they?"

Stub fashioned a big loop in one end of the wire, coiled it and stuck it in his bunk. Boxcar sat back on his bunk, kicked his boots away and rested massive shoulders against the cold stone wall. He said, "I never knowed of a man tuh get stir-crazy so quick."

Even as day was breaking over the flat country around Crazy Springs, Stub and Boxcar rolled from damp blankets and were soon plying deft brushes to two-handled crockery items—with lids. Stub was singing in a low voice:

"Roses are red;
Cowboys are too.
If this is a item,
I'm a Hindu!"

There was an expression of pleased surprise on the pinched face of Sheriff Bolivar Sneed when he shoved half a loaf of bread and a pot of coffee through the bars of the jail door. "Seeing as you are repentant," he droned, "and entirely industrious, something might be done about cutting your time. . . ."

Stub was fishing an unpainted item from a packing case. It splintered on a steel plate in front of the sheriff's face, and the two rooms resounded to the crash of shattered white pottery.

"Stub!" Boxcar Bailey wailed.

"You—you bandy-legged, hog-spavined, bit-lipped ol' maverick," Stub exploded, "git yer weasel face outa that door!"

The sheriff retreated hastily through the litter on the office floor, and Stub took up his brush.

The noonday meal was warm water and two hunks of stale bread; the evening meal was two hunks of bread and cold water. Later, with Stub and Boxcar herded at gun-point into a corner, the finished crockery items were removed. Fresh stock was left in its place.

"Just something to do," the sheriff explained, "until election is over."

"Stub!" Boxcar warned. "Keep yer trap shut!"

At daybreak the following day, Boxcar piled from his bunk to investigate a sound of activity in the street. "Why, them lowdown, unorthodox sheepherders," he fumed, "has got our hosses hitched to one o' them wagon loads o' campaign crockery!"

"It's only fair," Stub remarked.

"Yeah," Boxcar replied, "I s'pose that's right."

THERE was only a skeleton crew at the Two-Handled Crockery Item—With Lid—factory, that day. Election day, nobody worked. One deputy was delegated to swamp the shattered pottery from the sheriff's office in preparation for the inaugural brawl. The sheriff donned a too-small derby and engaged in drooling over babies and giving away a few unpainted two-handled crockery items—with lids. He spent much time around the office of the Crazy Springs *Weekly Bugle,* where the votes were counted. Stub Woffard guessed, by the supercilious expression worn by the sheriff, that the local vote was in his favor.

It was late in the evening when vote reports started coming in from the outlying districts. Sheriff Bolivar Sneed lighted the big hanging lamp in his office and sat back to await the final vote tally and the plaudits of his supporters. In anticipation of the

event he settled the derby firmly on his pointed head, and took a long pull on one of five black bottles he had set up on his desk.

Stub licked dry lips. He said, "I'd like tuh smack that hump-shouldered monkey acrost th' face with a sockful o' stinkin' mud."

Boxcar Bailey touched a match to the candle. "Who wouldn't?" he asked reasonably.

Stub was pushing the big loop on the wire through the jail window and tying a smaller loop in the other end when there was the sound of running footsteps on the stairs. A wild-eyed deputy sheriff burst into the office. The sheriff inserted thumbs in his suspenders, lowered his beady eyes, blushed and waited for the good news.

"Sheriff!" the deputy yelled. "You done got whopped—some feller named James Sylvester Woffard took all th' outside votes an' nosed you out!"

The deputy rushed down the stairs without closing the door. The smirk on the derbied sheriff gave way to a sickly stare. He arose with uncertain movements and started through the door. "No!" he yelled at the departed deputy. "No! No!"

"Now!" Stub hissed, pushing his head between two of the window bars and his arms between others. "Hand me a two-handled item—with lid—an' we're ready tuh go! Wrap your hands in a blanket an' grab that small loop."

The sheriff came through the door below the jail window. Above, Stub Woffard poised a two-handled crockery item—with lid.

"Sheriff!" he called softly.

Sheriff Bolivar Sneed paused long enough for Stub to arc the crockery item downward. There was a resounding crash, and pieces of pottery flew in every direction. The derby was jammed over the sheriff's eyes and he staggered in a dazed circle on wobbling legs. A wire loop settled over his weaving body to a point below groping hands and jerked under his armpits.

"Heave!" Stub yelled.

By the time the sheriff was hoisted to window level, he was beginning to chirp feebly. Stub's darting hand relieved him of his gun and jail keys. By the time the jail door was opened and they had found their guns in a drawer, their hostage was making the town ring with terrorized yelling. A crowd gathered.

"Watch th' office door, Boxcar," Stub yelled, hurrying back to the jail window.

"Feller citizens," Stub yelled, "This is James Sylvester Woffard, th' newly elected sheriff, talkin'. When all th' deppities o' this lowlife Sheriff Sneed line up in the street an' throw their guns in a pile, I'll cut th' baboon outa th' winder!"

"Doggone," Boxcar commented from out front, "your ol' brain is beginnin' tuh locomote agin!"

STUB was thinking the same thing, until a howling slug from across the street ripped through a case of crockery stock, glanced on a jail bar and thudded into the office wall. There was a sodden thump outside, followed by a raging whoop.

Stub rubbed the stubble on his round chin and eyed the bullet-severed wire where Sheriff Sneed had been hanging. By the yelling in the street, he knew the sheriff was fixing to eliminate political competition.

"Two or three o' you deputies get over back o' the courthouse," the sheriff yodeled. "Everybody else get in the factory. Shoot to kill. James Woffard ain't the name this jailbird gave to me. It's nothing but a attempted jailbreak!"

"This," observed Stub to his woeful partner, "is a doggoned mess. They don't dare tuh tackle us, an' we'd be crazy tuh rush them."

Braving the smashing lead that poured through the windows, Boxcar doused the lights. "Might be," he gulped, "that we should lock up th' jail an' throw th' key an' our guns in th' street. After that we could take up paintin' crockery items where we left off, an' hope for an earthquake or Sheriff Sneed's sudden death."

"You forget," Stub said, "that we have several personal grudges to settle before we take this shebang over, th' first o' th' year."

"Yuh mean like runnin' that sheriff till his ankles smoke?" Boxcar inquired as he stepped into a safe corner to ignite a cigarette.

"Yeah—him an' that dirty-eared judge."

The sheriff's office yielded two double-barreled shotguns, one sawed off, and a carbine. The stone wall was turning lead from across the street, but better-aimed slugs tore through the windows and made them flinch as they carried the guns and a case or two of ammunition into the jail. The biting smell of burned powder blended with the stench of paint as Boxcar raised up now and again to blast the crockery item building with No. 0 buckshot. Orange flashes streaked from every window of the opposite structure. Townspeople huddled in tight knots out of the line of fire.

Boxcar peered through the gloom. "Got somethin' figured out?" he asked hopefully.

"Yep," Stub replied. "Take a safe position here by th' window an' start shootin' at that nearest upright over there—see? I'll be behind th' office safe, doin' th' same thing."

All available guns were blistering hot and about two cases of ammunition were gone before a supporting timber under the big water tank over the Two-Handled Crockery Item—With Lid—plant began to crumble.

Boxcar let both barrels of his sawed-off go at the main part of the building, just to hear the crockery crash when the buckshot ploughed into reserve stocks. *"Timberrrr!"* he whooped joyfully as the square tank settled more on the bullet-riddled support.

The added weight of water slopping to the low side was too much for the weakened structure, and with a grinding roar the tank tipped forward and crashed halfway through the roof below.

"If yuh can't shoot 'em," Boxcar yelled, "drown 'em!"

"Keep me covered!" Stub yelled back. "Here I go!"

Stub paused in the darkness of the courthouse door at the street. There was no sound from the building across the way, except the occasional yell of a waterlogged deputy. Water was pouring out of second-story windows.

Suddenly there was the sound of feet splashing through water, and Sheriff Bolivar Sneed leaped from the main entrance into the moonlit street, watersoaked and wild-eyed. Holding his derby aboard his head with both hands, he broke into a one-man stampede.

Stub, with a bloodcurdling shout, dumped a cargo of buckshot ahead of the speeding lawman. Boxcar, in the jail, maneuvered his sawed-off around and sewed a pattern behind him. The effect was immediate. Sheriff Sneed almost tore boot-heels off, stopping.

"Come here!" Stub commanded, dropping another load in the overworked shotgun. "Come here with your hands up, yuh yeller-bellied gully lizard, before I plumb lose my temper and ventilate your mangy carcass!"

He came. Stub noted that the lawman's holster was still empty, and when he nudged him from behind with the snout of the twin-bore, he took the courthouse steps three at a time. Boxcar had watched the procedure and was lighting the candle over near the outside stone wall. His pockets were bulging with shotgun ammunition. "I'm goin' over an' supervise th' extricatin' business," he announced.

"Okay," Stub agreed, "but don't stick your neck out. Tell 'em yuh're goin' tuh set th' place on fire if they don't pile out, an' quick—an' if yuh see ol' Judge Dirty-Ears, bring 'im back."

SHERIFF BOLIVAR SNEED was blinking his little eyes, shifting his feet, licking dry lips and twirling his derby.

"Wh—what you want?" he stammered.

"My proposition," answered Stub, "is simple. . . . It's about ninety days before I take over here—so tuh make things quicker, all you have tuh do is sign my deputy's commission an' your resignation!"

The sheriff staggered backwards. "No!" he almost wept.

Stub took a step forward, and the sheriff cringed away. His angular elbow hooked into a pile of leftover painted two-handled crockery items piled on the counter. He leaped wildly to one side when three of them crashed to the floor.

"Hmmmm," Stub reflected. "Thirty days per. Now look, podner," he continued, "either you get busy with them documents, or I stand you in the corner and bust every cockeyed piece of pottery around here on your misshapen skull!"

Sheriff Sneed capitulated. With palsied movements the sheriff penned the two brief documents and then settled back, bathed in cold sweat, as the door suddenly burst open.

Stub grabbed the shotgun and was ready to go until he noted that Dirty-Ears, the judge, was being ushered in by a triumphant and grinning Boxcar Bailey, laden with rifles and sixguns taken from the embattled deputies in the Two-Handled Crockery Item building.

Stub unshouldered the shotgun. "Good evening, Judge!" he smiled. "We're about tuh hold a little court session. Thought maybe you'd like tuh write out a couple o' pardons for th' new sheriff an' his deppity—an' besides, we want tuh sign a mopery complaint agin' th' ex-sheriff an' git him salted away for about ninety days, so's he can ketch up a little with th' pottery paintin'."

Gulping and wild-eyed, the judge cringed back, and Boxcar's presented sawed-off touched him. The judge sprang forward again. "No!" he breathed.

"Judge," Stub asked pleasantly, "did any ornery maverick ever bust you over th' head with a piece o' painted pottery?"

"Or," contributed Boxcar, "did yuh ever have nightmares about runnin' through town without any clothes?"

The judge had never been victimized by lawless citizenry to that extent, but the idea horrified him. With fevered alacrity he guided justice in a hurried course and loped through the door. Stub ushered the ex-sheriff into the jail and set him up in business among bullet-riddled paint cans and shattered two-handled crockery items. By the aid of the bottled candle, Sneed did a shaky, but thorough job.

Stub lighted the big lamp in the office. "That's th' only way tuh do business," he remarked, pinning the sheriff's badge on a plaid red shirt. "Legal, all th' way around."

THERE was another knock on the door. Under the cold stare of four shotgun barrels a small, brisk individual with thick glasses and a pencil pushed in at Stub's invitation.

"I'm Charley Spencer," the newcomer announced. "Editor of the Crazy Springs *Weekly Bugle*, and chairman of the election board." He looked at the star on Stub's barrel chest. "I take it," he continued, "that you are James Sylvester Woffard—but can you prove it?"

The shotguns were lowered. Stub blushed and pulled at his shirt-tail. " 'Bout th' only thing," he confessed, "is a tattoo on my middle."

"Let's see it," grunted the efficient newspaperman. Squinting through the thick glasses, he studied the tattooed name inscribed across Stub's bulging mid-section.

"Something wrong," he said. "The name here is Wooffard!"

"Shucks, mister," Stub giggled, "one o' them o's ain't what yuh think it is!"

"Oh," said Mr. Spencer, blinking his eyes. "Oh!" Apparently satisfied, he pulled scratch-paper from his pocket. "We go to press tomorrow," he said, "and would like the story of your campaign, especially as to how you managed to get your name in the pot!"

"Simple!" contributed Boxcar, grabbing up one of the spare campaign items on the counter. "Just wrote it there—look for yourself!"

Mr. Spencer blinked his eyes again before thrusting his chin over the edge of the gay-colored receptacle. He read aloud: "Vote for James Sylvester Woffard for sheriff—the people's choice!"

Inside the jail, a two-handled crockery item — with lid — slipped from suddenly numbed fingers and crashed on the floor.

BLOOD AIN'T EVERYTHING

He could hear the roar of the narrows below....

By JOE AUSTELL SMALL

Cattle and horses, jacks and jennies, old Jake McDonald could love and understand with a cowman's savvy. But the dad-blamed colt mule, he grumbled, wasn't worth its fodder—let alone trusting it with his own and his son's life against that gray man-killing range terror!

LIGHTNING streaked and thunder rumbled across the northern horizon. The gentle slopes lost their brilliant hue, in the waning sun, turned to ashen gray.

"Pa," young Ken McDonald said uneasily, "that storm's bearin' down fast. She's standin' right up on her hind legs and whoopin'!"

Old Jake McDonald leaned on the heavy auger, drew a dirty red handkerchief from his pocket and wiped a long, thin nose. "Looks like she might be a booger at that." The old man's mealy blue eyes narrowed.

"Drag me up that post there by your heel. We'll set it and knock off. Guess you're worried about that Morgan mare. Wouldn't be a bad idea to look her up, at that."

The kid tromped thick clay around the post with his boot-heel. "Not 'special worried," he said. "It's just that the storm's comin' up faster'n I figured."

When the last agonized squeak finally quieted in the rickety buckboard, the sky had turned to a sickly crimson. Damp, cold wind rattled a loose sheet of tin on the old cowshed.

"Go git your slicker," Jake instructed. "Don't stay out long if you can't find her, son. Looks like it's comin' a norther and a chunk-floater to boot!"

The boy raced indoors, stopped in the fireplace room to think where he'd put that slicker.

The thunder came again, rattled a loose window-pane. Ken shivered with panic. He'd have to get that mare back to shelter. She might have the colt tonight. He couldn't risk Black Stallion spending his first night in a storm like that.

The boy found his slicker in the kitchen closet and feverishly saddled old 'Bout-Dead. He climbed on the easy-going nag, bogged his spurs impatiently.

The light had turned a sickly yellow when 'Bout-Dead made the far bank of Armadillo Creek, started across a strip of prairie. There was a glimmering glow to things that made the kid's stomach quiver. The bunch grass bowed down under a head-wind that moaned drearily across the prairie.

As the late afternoon sun paled, as the serrated ridges lost their sharp etching against the sky, the kid pressed forward recklessly.

That blamed Black Morgan mare was spirited, skittish. She ought to have enough sense to come in if she was going to have the colt tonight. Sometimes a mare went half loco at a time like that, picked the wildest section of a ranch to drop her colt.

The kid headed for the North Woods Pasture. He'd seen her there yesterday. He hadn't bothered the mare. She ought to be there still.

KEN put his slicker on as it started raining. The first big drops knocked up spurts of dust from the prairie ground. It came slow at first. Then lightning ripped and thunder seemed to shake the very ground.

The laden sky opened flood-gates, spilled out icy, driving rain.

Ken entered the outer fringes of North Woods Pasture as stinging rain drove the dry warmth from every exposed object. He couldn't seem to make old 'Bout-Dead realize the importance of this mission. The

Black Stallion

old nag was slow and stiff-necked. He wanted to turn around and go back to the dry warmth of the headquarters corrals.

Anxiously the kid searched out swags and draws. He worked through thick yaupon thickets, rode around brush heaps and windfalls, made cuts across the thick stands of post oaks. The sameness of it maddened him. The boy cussed some and cried a little as black desperation rose within him.

Ken McDonald couldn't find the mare.

Perhaps this wasn't the night. But the kid had a feeling that it was. She was coming near yesterday. And the little colt wouldn't have a chance on a night like this. He'd never live it out.

The thought of losing Black Stallion wouldn't have been so bad, but it would be the first thing of value the boy ever owned. Ken had bragged about what a great stallion his colt would make. He'd win first place with his horse at the county fair. Fine blood always counts, Ken had said.

The kid thought of all this and wiped a wet hand across his nose. In a little while it would be too late to see the mare unless he was right on her.

An uneasy whinny finally caused Ken McDonald to bear down Panther Branch to where the banks rose high into miniature cliffs. The sound came faintly above the howling wind and rain. At a sharp bend in the creek, he found her. The mare was bedded down in the lee of a great sand bank bluff, on a low, dry knoll up against the sheer wall.

It would have been a fine place to have her colt, ordinarily. But the knoll formed a tiny island between the creek water and the bluff. Panther Branch was rising rapidly, would soon cover the low knoll.

The boy sucked in his breath, seeing suddenly that the mare was down, was switching her tail. He could hear her labored grunts. She was having the colt now. She'd never be able to move before she dropped the colt—maybe not then.

THE creek was rising fast. Dirty water swirled around the sharp bend, piling up on the tiny hummock under the overhanging cliff. The kid spurred his mount forward. 'Bout-Dead snorted, stamped his front feet. He wouldn't take the creek. Ken dismounted quickly, waded into the swirling water.

It was a flash flood all right. Panther Branch, ordinarily a sluggish, knee-deep stream, was now up to his waist in spots. He could hear the roar of water a hundred yards on down where the branch narrowed to pass through the chute.

The black Morgan mare had gone through considerable trouble dropping this colt. Ken could tell that by her heavy breathing. He couldn't see very well in the heavy gloom up next to the cliff, but the mare didn't try to fight him away from her colt. That meant she wasn't so well off.

The kid worked slowly, carefully. He could barely make out a black smudge by the mare. With a little cry of gladness he knelt and felt the damp warmth of the tiny animal. Quickly he pulled off his slicker and wrapped it around the newborn colt. He tied a fodder string around the bundle so that the slicker wouldn't come off. Black Stallion couldn't stand much of this cold rain and wind.

Ken gathered the bundle into his arms. He tried to make the mare get up, but she wouldn't move. Desperately, he urged the black Morgan to stir. He glanced at the rushing water. A little higher and he couldn't make it back himself. With a worried frown, the kid waded into the swirling water. He hated to leave the mare here. Water would be over that low hummock in a matter of minutes. Maybe she could swim out of it in her present condition, and maybe she couldn't. But there was nothing Ken could do about it.

The boy braced himself against the angry current. The colt was heavier than he had figured. And the water was higher. He had to hold the bundle up a little more with each step he took. It would have been hard to keep his footing against that current unhampered, but with forty pounds of colt in his arms it was doubly difficult.

When the water reached his chest, Ken leaned against the current, worked the heavy bundle up on his shoulder. The colt wiggled feebly. The kid was glad he was in the middle of the stream. If it had gotten much deeper, he couldn't have stayed up. A heavy chunk of blurred shadow hove into sight, riding the crest of a foam-dotted current. The kid dodged, lost his footing. Angry water semed to clutch at him with greedy hands. It dragged him down, rushed him along at a sickening pace.

KEN went under briefly. He came up spluttering, trying to fight out against the push of roaring water. His arms were clasped tightly around his clumsy bundle. The roar of the Chute rapids grew louder fast. No man or beast could get through that mad cauldron of foaming water and sharp, ragged boulders tonight. Ken would have to get out of the creek now—or go down the Chute.

Suddenly, the boy's boot found an irregularity in the stream bed. He caught, held a moment, then was swirled aside and on down. Going around a bend, the current shot him straight at the bank. He held the bundle under one arm, desperately clutching at the wet clay bank. It wouldn't hold. His fingers left claw-like marks in the softening red soil.

Ken McDonald was scared. He was grasping at outcroppings, trying to hold onto the round, red rocks. He was just above the upper neck of the Chute, and the white-foamed water roared in his ears. He'd have to get hold of something soon with his right hand. His left arm was

curled around the slicker-covered bundle in a death-grip. Ken McDonald didn't aim to let that grip slacken. . . .

The rushing water had piled up, created a sizable pond just above the neck of the narrow chute. There was a hollow trough in the middle of this pool, formed by the terrific suction created by the narrow neck. Ken already felt the pull of it on his body.

His groping hand felt the rough bark of a small limb, and he clutched it desperately. But one hand wasn't enough to free himself from the water's pull. The boy felt a slow, helpless panic. He had safety in his grasp here, but it looked like he couldn't do anything about it—unless, of course, he let the colt go. . . .

The kid started working the bundle around in front of him. He moved it around slowly, worked it into a wedge between his two arms. He could use both hands now, if he took it easy.

Ken McDonald felt weak when he finally reached old 'Bout-Dead, but the colt was all right. He'd kept it above water most of the time. When it had gone under, the slicker had protected it some. Ken felt it breathe evenly through the heavy wrapping.

THE kid was blowing heavily when he half-carried, half-dragged the slicker-covered bundle inside the ranch house. He was cold and wet, and his teeth were chattering. He'd used his slicker to wrap the colt in, and he was soaked to the skin.

Old Jake met him in the kitchen. He was buttoning up his slicker.

"Just fixin' to go after you," the old man said. "What happened?"

"Guess we lost the mare, Pa," the kid said. "But I got the colt. He's here in th' slicker."

Jake took the bundle. He carried it to the fireplace, put it on the warm hearth. "Looks like you're about done in," he said, glancing uneasily at the kid while he untied the fodder string and unwrapped the slicker. "Let's have a look at the colt, and then I'll doctor you up."

The kid's eyes were glowing with excitement, watching the slicker unfold. Then he sucked in his breath; his lower jaw sagged. The kid's eyes were stricken, wide with utter disbelief.

"Why gawda'mighty son!" old Jake McDonald exclaimed. He slapped a slender thigh and guffawed in spontaneous humor. "Your fine-blooded colt has turned out to be a dad-blamed mule!"

He saw the hurt in Ken's eyes, and the old rancher's smile died quickly. "That breedin' with Doug Watson's stallion musta not took," he explained. "An' later th' mare mated up with that rambunctious jackass."

The kid sat down before the fire and sighed heavily. His lips were tight, and a trickle of moistness that wasn't rain glistened as it ran down his face. He said, "Guess the whole country'll rawhide me good an' proper 'bout this—Sam an' Buck 'specially. They been wantin' to get rid of that ornery jack for months and I kept talkin' you into keepin' him."

"Aw, what's a little rawhidin'? They won't have to know about this, son—nobody'll have to know. They'll figure th' colt died with his ma in this storm. We can do away with little long-ears here before the boys get back—"

"I'm gonna keep the mule colt, Pa," the kid said. He was staring vacantly into the fire. "The mare's dead by now. Too weak to ever get across that creek. She was the only real good-blooded stock we had. I won't get another chance to own a colt like this'n shoulda been—" The kid's voice broke. He was silent for a moment. Then he continued, "I'm gonna keep this colt. I'm gonna ride him and I'm gonna call him Black Stallion!"

"You'll feel better when you pull on some dry clothes, get a little warm grub down you and rest up awhile," the old rancher said. "Sam and Buck are workin' the south pasture fence. Cattle are driftin' with the storm pretty bad. I just come from there. They won't be back till the storm dies down a little. If you change your mind by then—"

"I'm gonna keep the colt," Ken McDonald repeated. He spat into the fire. "I'm gonna keep that ugly little devil, if it makes me the laughing-stock of the whole country. . . ."

THE kid was surprised at the lack of rawhiding he got at first. He had seen old Jake's lips tighten and the graying head shake significantly when his pa told the boys about it. They had remarked that it was too bad, and there had been little said about the mule since. Now that he thought about it, Ken knew that they were feeling

sorry for him. And the way Ken McDonald looked at it, that was worse than rawhiding, So he began bragging on the the mule colt deliberately. The kid knew it wouldn't be long before he'd get some response.

It came the day they caught him feeding the colt brown caked sugar. "My, my!" Buck observed. "That mule sure gets dainty feedin'!"

"Yeah," Sam said. "He gets purt'-near baby care. Some say that mule even gets bathed regular!"

"Shore 'nuff?" Buck's eyes widened. They walked off talking to themselves, but loud enough for the kid to hear. Buck continued, "Wouldn't surprise me none if he'd come up some mornin' wearin' lace on his tail!"

The kid's lips tightened a little. He smiled then, dusted the loose sugar from his hands and slapped Black Stallion on the rump. The little mule backed his ears and kicked out with a tiny hind leg. He saw the old Plymouth Rock rooster stroll leisurely by. The colt let out a spluttering sound and took after the rooster.

"I'd be enjoyin' his didoes a heap right now," the kid told himself thoughtfully, "if he just wasn't a mule. "

The mule's orneriness developed with his size and strength. But the boy was lonely. Having no other pet to share his hours, he spent them with Black Stallion. He lavished care on the animal, fed him until the little mule was round as a beer-keg.

The colt walked into the bunkhouse one morning. Buck, his eyes heavy with sleep, at first thought it was the grizzly that had been attacking their herds. The gangling cowboy hollered once and went into action. He was out in the yard and halfway down to the corrals when Sam called him back.

A few days later, old Jake McDonald came in from a ride across the north range. There was a grim look in his eyes.

"I still don't believe it's a grizzly!" he said, stamping the dust from his boots and unsaddling the weary dun. "Been twenty years since one strayed this far east from the Pecos country!"

"Ain't no black bear makes tracks like that," Buck said solemnly. "And ain't no black bear can do to a pack o' dogs what he done to ours—and later to Josh's." He looked at Sam for confirmation.

"He's a slick un'. He's holed up back there among them red rock hills and gullies in that wild Panther Branch country. I'll bet my Sat'dy night drinkin' money it's a grizzly!"

"Whatever it is has got to be stopped purty soon," Jake said. He pulled off the saddle and hung it up, waited for the metallic clanking of the stirrups to quiet before continuing. "Else we'll be cow-short in the north pasture. Found two yearlin's gutted and partly et. Rode the gullies 'n hills all day, but I couldn't cut any sign."

THE boy had little trouble in breaking his mule to ride. The animal had become so used to the kid wallowing around over him in their play that he took it as a matter of course when Ken threw a saddle blanket across his back and hopped on.

"If I just had a saddle that'd fit him," Ken said one day to old Jake, "I believe that mule'd ride easier'n old 'Bout-Dead. Little devil's gonna make a real saddle horse!"

"A saddle for a mule?" Jake chuckled. "Now wouldn't you look pretty ridin' into town on the son of a blamed jackass!"

It was fall now, and the old swimming hole was getting a little cool, but the kid would hop on his mule bareback and head him for the creek. He'd ride the protesting animal right off into the hole and keep him there until the kid tired of swimming. Eventually, the mule came to look on this daily bath at the creek hole as one of his duties. He even seemed to enjoy it, in an enduring sort of way.

The kid should have noticed it sooner. He was generally quick to gauge old Jake's feelings on any subject. But the way his dad had grown to feel about the mule came as a complete surprise.

It was immediately following Black Stallion's truck-patch escapade. The mule had broken in, tromped down choice heads of cabbage, scattered and crumpled a bed of sweet potatoes, and considerably damaged two rows of choice fall turnips.

"Ken," the old rancher said, "that blamed mule has been right out of one thing into another'n ever since you brought him on this place. I'm gonna sell that blasted jackass on our first drive to Ridge Hollow come round-up time. I'as thinkin' maybe we better take along the mule too."

The kid caught his breath. "Y'mean Black Stallion here? Why, Pa, he's got to be my pet, sorta. I'd hate to—"

"You're a cattleman, son," the old man broke in. "A cattleman loves horses—not mules! We're gonna get you that colt yet. Then I'll buy you that new saddle you been talkin' about."

"I'd been sorta hopin' to get a saddle for Black Stallion here," the boy said. "He rides pretty good."

"You want a horse to ride, son," Jake McDonald said. "Not a plague-goned mule!" He turned and stamped off toward the corrals, and kicked a clod of hardened dirt into skittering pieces as he went.

Ken had to bite his underlip to keep it from quivering. The kid thought a lot of that blamed mule. He couldn't imagine what life would be like without the pesky devil now. But when Jake McDonald made his mind up about a thing, it generally stayed made up.

KEN knew something was wrong when he first caught sight of his father riding hell-for-leather across the north hogback. It couldn't be the approaching rainstorm that he was running from. It wasn't that close yet. The kid ran outside to meet him.

Jake McDonald slid to the ground in a whirl of dust. "Go git Buck and Sam!" he said, running into the house.

"What's the matter, Pa?" the kid asked, his eyes wide.

"Run up on that damned grizzly killin' a calf!" the old man explained breathlessly. "Emptied my hip-gun into him. The big devil started at me, roarin'. I got out of the way, and he headed for rough country. A hip-gun'd be next to nothin' at close quarters with that big devil, so I come for my rifle. First time I rode off without it in three months!" The old rancher reached high for the old lever-action .30-30 over the mantel.

"Pa," the kid said, a worried look on his face, "I heard it said you can't hardly kill a grizzly with a .30-30! Better let me go 'long with you an'—"

"You go git Buck an' Sam like I tol' you!" the old rancher said. "He's headed for th' red rock hills. May take us all to git him. Hurry now!'

The kid ran out of the house, saddled up old 'Bout-Dead and rode south. He found the boys and gave them his message breathlessly.

"Knew damned well that was a grizzly!" Buck said, his eyes sparkling. "Le's go!"

They stopped by the house on the way back to get their rifles. When they came out, the kid pulled his battered saddle off the 'Bout-Dead nag. Quickly he dragged it toward the mule.

"You're not gonna ride that blamed mule, are you?" Buck asked.

" 'Bout-Dead's old. Already winded. He can't stand much runnin'," the boy explained.

"You can't keep up!" Sam warned, mounting his horse.

"I won't be far behind when you get there," the boy called.

It started raining then. It wasn't a gentle don't-give-a-damn kind of rain. It was a stand-on-your-hind-legs-and-shout cloudburst.

"Looks like this'n 'll be a gully-humper!" Buck said. He bent his head before the wind and bogged his spurs.

Ken could hear Buck's and Sam's mounts

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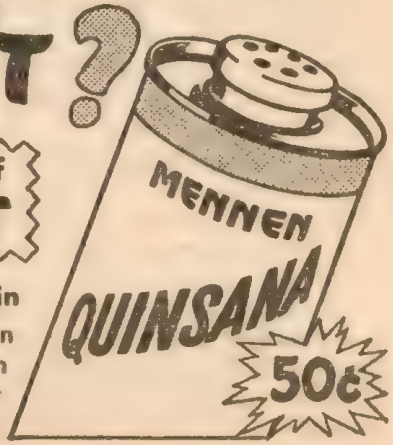


rattling the brush when they hit the head gullies. The kid's mind had conjured up a dozen pictures already of that fight with the grizzly. The big bear would be charging, and four guns would be belching out slugs of lead. The boy leaned forward and felt of the reassuring steel of his .30-30 brush gun. It was still partly dry in the heavy leather scabbard.

He heard the roars of an infuriated grizzly, then the sharp spangs of the .30-30. There were four shots. The grizzly kept on roaring—but the gun was quiet now.

FEAR gripped the kid suddenly. He urged the mule on. The heavy undergrowth opened up, and he saw Panther Branch. It was on a rampage again: an avalanche of white, rolling water. Buck and Sam were in sight now, spurring their mounts frantically, whipping them over the heads with their rein straps. The horses sat back on their haunches, let out frightened whinnies and rolled their eyes in terror. They wouldn't take the creek. Old Jake McDonald was in danger and they wouldn't take the creek. The kid felt sick at his stomach as he remembered something else. Buck and Sam couldn't swim.

"Keep that blasted mule out of the way," Buck yelled as the kid rode up. Blind, desperate urgency edged his words. "Stay back or you'll get hurt! Your pa's over there in that thicket with a grizzly—an' we can't get these blasted nags to take the water! Whoa now! C'mon, boy!"

Their mounts wheeled, fought back on the bits.

Ken urged the mule forward. "C'mon, Black Stallion," he said. "It's time to go swimmin' agin!"

He clamped his knees about the animal's shoulders as he did when they were about to hit water in the old swimming hole. He rattled his spurs and pressed them gently into the mule's side.

The animal slung his head from side to side, looked up and down the creek. He felt the pressure of the kid's knees again, shook his long ears and waded into the rushing water.

The kid and the mule were forty yards downstream when they finally made it across. Ken had held the short carbine over his head during the crossing. He lowered it now, pulled down the lever to check the action. He headed Black Stallion toward the snarl of buckbrush, yaupon and grapevine in a long lope.

They were well into the thicket before the kid heard a low, rumbling cough from the tangles ahead. The mule was getting nervous now. He had picked up the bear-scent—maybe the smell of blood. Ken figured it would be best to leave the mule here and go the rest of the way on foot. Tied lightly, the mule would wait for him there. A mule was different from a horse. A horse would get into barbed wire, cut itself to pieces trying to get out. A mule would stand there, stock still, until someone got him out unhurt. A mule simply had more sense.

He was getting pretty close now. The light carbine trembled a little in his hands. He tried to remember what Jake had told him about stalking dangerous game. Be calm. Take long, even breaths instead of fast, jerky ones. If your hands tremble or feel cold, flex your fingers so the blood will circulate. Don't think about how scary the thing ahead looks. Think about where to put that first bullet. . . .

THERE he was now. He was licking raw wounds and looking at something lying there on the ground. The bear stood up on his hind legs when the boy came in sight. He looked big, standing there in the eerie light of the thicket, discouragingly big. The rain had slackened, but thunder still crashed and lightning streaked.

There lay old Clabber in plain sight. The dog was still, crimson-covered.

The kid froze motionless. He couldn't lift the carbine. He couldn't even turn and walk back. That was old Jake's hat lying there at the bear's feet.

The boy thought about what his pa had said. Think about how to do the job at hand, instead of being afraid the thing'll hurt you. Ken relaxed slightly. He brought up the little carbine. He aimed at a spot just below the bear's left forearm, pressed the trigger.

The big grizzly staggered back, then roared out a challenge and came forward.

The kid levered a fresh cartridge into the firing chamber. He took deliberate aim. At the sharp crack of the little rifle, the big grizzly seemed to shake all over. He bit angrily at a spot on his left chest.

The bear seemed to be immune to lead. He was shot through the heart, hit maybe eight or nine times altogether by old Jake, and yet the roaring monster came on. Feverishly the kid pushed down the lever of his carbine again. His hands shook. He wanted to cry out, drop his rifle and run. Instead, he aimed carefully as the bear towered over him. The little carbine barked.

It brought the big bear to his forefeet. He hesitated, shook his shaggy head, but came on again. The kid levered another cartridge into his carbine. The bear was almost upon him now. It was within three feet of the muzzle when the little rifle rang out for the last time. The big grizzly lunged forward blindly, knocking the kid back. He was slammed into the bole of a yaupon bush by a glancing blow as the big grizzly lost his balance. The bear was scrambling about in the matted tangles off the trail, roaring, writhing, coughing and snapping his teeth.

The kid got to his feet and staggered down the trail to where Jake's body lay. The old rancher was still breathing.

The mule shied a little at old Jake's limp form, but he was steady. The kid grasped his father around the waist with one arm, took the reins in his left hand. He clucked to the mule and they entered the cold water again.

When Black Stallion hit the strong center current, it took him down. He went under once, came up shaking his long ears and blowing. The current was carrying them on down at a sickening pace. Ken heard the roar of the narrows below, where white water sliced against the rocks.

The boy pressed his knees hard against the mule's sides. The little animal was fighting now, fighting the current as he had never fought before.

They were under again now, jerked crazily about by the current. The heavy drag of his father's body was pulling Ken out of the saddle. He grasped the saddle horn tightly, held on to old Jake with the other hand. He was weak and exhausted, and things didn't seem quite real.

Ken felt eager hands grasp him then, felt solid ground under his feet. He was even conscious of the mule shaking the cold water from his short hair. Then he let himself slump forward into a soft, warm darkness.

BUCK and Sam were sitting by the bed when Ken opened his eyes. There was a roaring fire in the fireplace. Old Jake lay in the bed across from him. The men's faces were anxious as they looked at him.

"How's Pa?" the boy asked.

"Couldn't kill that old devil!" Buck beamed. "Doc says he'll pull out all right. That grizzly knocked him out. It's all that saved his life. Long as a man lays quiet, a bear thinks he's dead and won't bother him. How you feel?"

"All right," the kid said. "How's old—the mule?"

"Me an' Buck's got all the feed he can eat in two days piled in front of him!" Sam beamed. "We got him in the shed too. Put a blanket around him!"

The kid bit his lower lip. The blamed thing felt like it was going to tremble a little. "Does Pa know—did you tell him about the mule?" he asked haltingly.

"Damn' right!" Buck said. "He come to fer a few minutes before we got home."

"What'd he say?" the boy asked.

"He asked the doc how long before he'd be up and around and on a horse. The doc said for him to take it easy, stay in bed awhile. He asked the old man what in heck he wanted up and on a horse for."

"What'd Pa say?" the boy asked.

Buck looked at Sam, and they both smiled. "Old man said he wanted to go to town." There was a gleam in the cowboy's eyes. "Said he had to buy a saddle."

Locked in life-or-death combat beneath the swirling waters of the Musselshell, Lynx Lesky knew that on his fighting skill depended all that had been won on the savage, perilous trek to Saint Louis. . . . A fortune in prime beaver plews—and the last hope for freedom of the far-flung wilderness traplines!

The brave sprang at Lesky, his knife flashing in the moonlight.

BUCKSKIN KNOWS NO LAW!

CHAPTER ONE

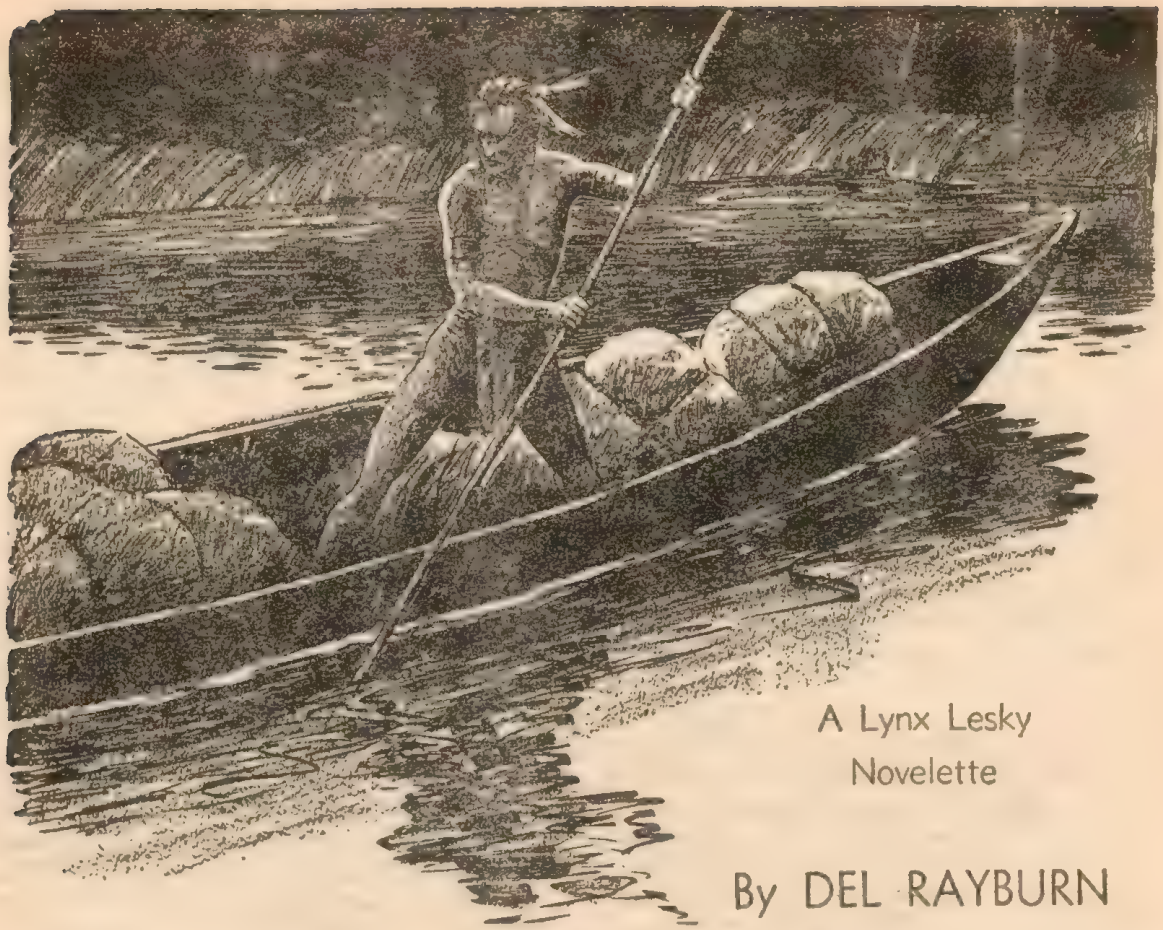
Rebels of the Fur-Trails

THE first thing Lynx Lesky saw, as he stepped into the Fort Musselshell fur shed, was a great, red-maned trapper. The fellow's greasy elk-skins had been cut to tatters and his own blood dyed them as red as his hair and beard.

"You still won't get my plews for no five dollars around on a damned credit-slip that'll buy nothing except out of your store!" the big redhead was bellowing. His blazing eyes were upon a bony-faced individual—the Fort Musselshell trader.

Suddenly, as if in answer to a sharp jerk of the trader's head, something whistled out from the deep shadows beyond the two men. Lesky's eyes could not yet penetrate that gloom, but he saw the rawhide lash that cut at the defiant trapper's bloody middle, jerking away to leave a fresh rent in the tattered elk-skins. The redhead dashed forward, roaring, but the cruel whip caught him in midstride, slammed him helplessly back.

Then Lynx caught his first glimpse of



A Lynx Lesky Novelette

By DEL RAYBURN

the whip-wielder, and the sight stopped his breath. For even on the frontier such a human monstrosity as hulked there was not common.

None of the three was yet aware of Lesky's presence, so preoccupied were they. But when he saw the bull-like shoulder muscles of the whip-thrower coiling to deliver a new blow, he raised his voice suddenly in protest.

"Whoa! That's no way to treat a mule, much less a white man!" He took a step forward, limping slightly from the bullet-wound he had taken escaping from the Sioux a few days earlier.

The trader's cold eyes flashed toward him him like naked blades. He saw puzzled indecision in the close-set, shoe-button black orbs the whip man turned to him. But in the redhead's eyes was a sudden look of hopeful wonder.

"Get out of here!" the trader snapped, his tone harsh with authority. "The store clerk will give you a credit slip—"

"I didn't come here to contribute to a charity," Lesky drawled casually, returning the trader's stabbing stare with no discomfort. A hapless fly buzzed past his head just then and one long-fingered hand swooped out, an eye-defying motion, and returned with the fly's legs imprisoned between forefinger and thumb. Surprise caused a widening flicker of the trader's narrow-lidded eyes.

Lesky's quick-fingered hand released the fly, and without seeming to move was hovering near the smooth-worn butt of the holstered Colt on his hip—an unusual weapon for a trapper. "From what Big Red, there, says, you don't believe in trading. I'm hunting a trader."

"Wagh!" the redhead roared joyously. "If it ain't another pilgrim that thinks a man who floats his sticks for himself ain't a slave to no damned trader!"

"If you have fur, you'll leave it here and take my five dollars credit each—if they're tops," the trader interjected coldly. "You see what happened to O'Hara when he got different ideas."

"Raymond thinks all the fur taken west of here, that Fort Benton don't get, is his," the defiant redhead snarled, "regardless of whether his price suits you or not. Thinks he's the little tin god of the Missouri."

"I've never liked little tin gods," Lesky murmured, in seeming good nature. "Maybe you and I, Red, had better mosey on to Fort Union. Round up your plews!"

AN APOPLECTIC flush swept the bony trader's pallid features, fanning the hate in his muddy eyes into an open flame.

"Whip! Dummy, whip!" he screeched. One talon-fingered hand stabbed inside his shirt, then jerked out filled with an ugly, short-snouted derringer.

Not one instant had his burning eyes left Lesky, but the young mountain man's incredibly fast hand was filled, the heavy .44 roaring, blasting the derringer away before he could trigger. Gasping a strangled oath, he gripped his shattered, nerve-tingling gun-hand. His eyes bugged with unbelief, still unable to believe what he had seen.

But the whip-wielder was unmindful of his master's fate, so engrossed was he in his cruel punishment of Big Red O'Hara. Delighted croaks bubbled from his hare-lipped mouth, his lash smoking out again to cut the tortured trapper.

Big Red, wounded and frustrated though he was, was fighting back as best he could. One heavy forearm warded off the snarling lash—but coil upon coil of leather cut down viciously upon it, like an angry, crushing snake.

With a hoarse snarl of pain, O'Hara grasped the whip before Dummy could jerk the coils free. He lunged back, meaning to tear the cruel weapon from the giant's hand. But nature had made up in brute strength for the brains on which she had slighted the dummy. His hulking shoulders hardly seemed to strain as he wrenched on the whip and jerked Big Red flat on his face.

Croaking excitedly, the dummy freed his lash with another vicious tug. The rawhide whistled viciously back over his shoulder, building speed that might end in a killing blow. Plainly he meant to finish O'Hara before the trapper could climb up from the floor.

Lesky triggered a second time—and the snarling flight of the whip did not reverse. The bullet cut it from the heavy stock in the dummy's big hand, letting it continue its backward course and fall to the ground in the darkness of the far corner.

"Grab your plews, Red, and let's drift," Lesky said calmly, his eyes alert upon both the wounded trader and the dazed giant. "These skunks may have friends hereabouts."

O'Hara seemed not to hear. Stubbornly he pushed himself up from the floor. The shaggy red hair of his head seemed to bristle as he stared at the whip-wielding dummy who had cut him into shreds.

"No whip," he murmured unbelievingly. And then bellowing:

"By granny! *No whip!*" He charged, closing with the giant like a buffalo bull. Big Red's first blow drew blood in one corner of the giant's deformed mouth. But the dummy only batted his piggy, close-set eyes and lunged upon him before he could step clear. The big Irishman was smothered in the crushing embrace of the dummy's heavy, muscle-corded arms. Someone had taught the fellow the tricks of bare-handed murder, for instantly he threw his weight forward, starting to double O'Hara over, meaning to force him down until his spine broke.

THE whole action had taken only a matter of seconds, but Lesky heard alarmed voices and running footsteps approaching outside. He drove a bullet through the toe of one of the dummy's heavy boots. Immediately the crushing arms relinquished their hold on Big Red, letting him fall upon his back to the ground as the dummy plopped himself down, intent upon nursing his bullet-scorched toes.

"Get your fur and let's clear out of here," Lesky urged, grasping O'Hara by the nape of the neck and jerking him erect.

In that one off-guard moment, the trader dove for the derringer which lay where it had fallen. Lesky turned back just in time to send a bullet smashing into the treacherous little weapon, setting off its charges and ruining it, before Raymond's fingers closed upon it.

But there was only one bullet left in his gun, and he did not know what opposition they might face outside. Whatever further trouble he would have to buck to get O'Hara and himself clear of the fort, the

sooner they went the easier it would be.

Lesky shouldered the small bale of fur he had brought with him and stepped out, his gun ready. A black-aproned clerk panted up to him.

"Where's Mister Raymond?" the counterman demanded suspiciously.

"In there," Lesky jerked his head toward the door behind him. "He's—"

"Get them, Masters!" the trader's voice shrilled angrily from the depths of the fur shed. "Don't let them get away. They're stealing fur!"

"Let me take a minute to go back and shut off his lying gab permanent, son." Big Red appeared at Lesky's side, bent under a heavy load of plews.

"We've got to leave now—if we leave," the younger trapper whispered. For a motley crew had gathered behind the clerk from the post store. They barred the way now—shaggy-haired trappers in filthy buckskins and sullen-faced braves, eyes glassy and bloodshot from poisonous trade whisky. Each one of them, Lesky knew, had been robbed of fur by Raymond, by means of crooked cards or whisky. Just the same they were ready to take up the trader's fight. For the shame that lay deep inside every one of them would not rankle so deeply if no other man bucked Raymond and got away with it.

"We got a special way of killing fur-thieves," declared a hulking, black-browed trapper, taking leadership of the crowd.

"Then why haven't you used it on Raymond?" Lesky threw back at him. "Or do you like turning over your catch for nothing? We're taking away just what fur we brought with us. We claim a right to sell it to any man we like—we don't like Raymond. Now clear the way!"

HE WAVED the long barrel of the .44 at them, but the crowd did not stir, sullen-faced but undecided. In only an instant they could become a raging pack. Lesky knew he must force a path through them quickly or he might never get the chance.

"Move!" he demanded. His eyes came back to send a personal challenge at the spokesman, his gun steadying upon the fellow. He saw defiance in the man's cloudy eyes. The words forming on that trapper's lips might send the others into action. Lesky knew it was time to use his last shell. He sent the lead snarling past the trapper's head.

Hunching his broad shoulders, he drove forward, following his lead as the trapper dodged aside. Ahead, the crowd wavered and broke a little to either side. Perhaps it was the unexpectedness of the shot or the sight of their spokesman's skin cap snatched from his head. Or it may have been fear of the young mountain man's hand-gun, for it was a strange and almost unknown weapon as yet on the frontier.

But Lesky cared only that momentarily, at least, a path was open through the murderous crowd. He plunged through, OHara tromping his heels. The fort gate was just ahead, and Lesky's impulse was to break into a run. But it would be like running from a pack of hounds, sure to bring savage attack. He forced himself to hold to a casual, defiant stride.

"If your backbone ain't scared of catching lead, mine is!" Big Red grumbled, but stayed directly behind his new-found friend, covering his back. "Danged thing's trying to crawl clean off of me. Raymond'll—"

Lead screamed past their heads and spanged into the heavy gatepost just ahead. Lesky knew it was time to move, fast. They dove through the gate, a second bullet knocking jagged splinters from the post as they passed it.

Lesky ducked to one side, shielding his back momentarily with the fort wall as he sprinted for the protection of a shed at the boat-landing on the river. Big Red stayed at his heels until they reached safety.

"Raymond don't shoot so well with his left hand," the big red-bearded trapper grinned as they pulled up behind the shed. "We sure missed hell by an eyelash that time. He hasn't let this much fur get away from him in years—especially not this year. N'Orleans money-bags are going to close him out if the take ain't better. And this year's fur is the worst ever. Where you get that prime stuff you're packing?"

"On the South Fork of the Flathead."

"Oh, one of Scot Livingstone's men? Is he still twisting Beaver Ruck's tail? How is Livingstone?"

"Dead," Lesky replied briefly. "You can guess whose doing it was. He was bringing all the fur he controlled to Saint Looey if Ruck didn't up his prices. He willed me

the job just before he checked in. We got clear of Ruck, but the Sioux got all the others of the brigade a few days upriver."

O'Hara whistled softly between his teeth. "If Raymond knew there was that much prime stuff anywhere in this country, he'd kill his grandmother to get it. How come you to put in here? You just looking for trouble?"

They reached the landing and headed on toward the boats tied up at its end.

"Livingstone had a daughter he wanted to get back to Saint Looey, along with the fur," Lesky explained. "I've near lost her twice already. Had to steal her back out of a Sioux village a couple of mornings ago. Being a Sioux chief's squaw ain't civilized, and I promised to get her safe back to civilization. So I put in here to pick up enough money to pay her way on a steamer, before anything else happens."

"How about boating down with you?" O'Hara suggested. " 'Pears you could use help. I'm guessing S'Looey'll see you rich."

"You aren't guessing right, then," Lesky quietly declared. His eyes were watching Big Red closely. He did need help, but he would rather go on alone than take a man who entertained notions about easy gain. "My take is coming from just what I took out of my own traps. The rest all goes to Livingstone's gal. The men that took that fur are dead, but they all owed her paw more than money. It's going to Saint Looey for Scot Livingstone and her."

"Suits me," Big Red agreed heartily. "There ain't no hog-blood in my veins. A man can only get so drunk, and when he sobers up his money's all gone anyhow. But we ain't shut of Raymond yet. My money says he's already setting out free drinks: he'll have a crew likkered up to do murder for him, come sundown!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Devil's Plews

SEVERAL miles downriver from Fort Musselshell Lesky shoved his light canoe shoreward and into the concealment of thick brush overhanging the water there. He helped O'Hara beach his more cumbersome bull-boat, then pushed ahead into a little opening. Signs of a camp were evident, but the place seemed deserted, and Diana Livingstone did not appear until he called. He was pleased with the way she had obeyed his instructions.

"Meet Big Red O'Hara," he greeted the girl as she stepped from the brush. "This is Scot's girl, Diana. "Big Red knew your father," he added, addressing himself again to Diana. He noticed the wide-eyed look of wonder and alarm with which she was eyeing the big red-bearded fellow. Then he realized that he had forgotten the cruel beating Big Red's body had taken and the bloody spectacle he must seem to Diana's eyes.

"Big Red was having an argument about fur prices with the trader, when I got to the fort," he explained. "The trader was using a big brute with a blacksnake, trying to change Red's mind about some plews. He didn't get anywhere with Red's mind, but he ruined a good part of his hide and his clothes."

"An Irishman's mind is sort of a tough proposition to handle," Big Red grinned. "Some claim it's because you can't do much with something that ain't."

"You poor man," Diana sympathized earnestly. "Isn't there something I can do for him?" She turned to Lesky.

"Unless Red would rather chance infection, it wouldn't hurt to get those cuts washed out with salt water. We don't have anything else."

"No—no, now. I never needed no woman tending after me," the big fellow protested weakly, flushing in embarrassment.

But Diana paid no attention to his protestations. She immediately began telling him what to do, and in the end he obeyed her. While she worked on O'Hara's wounds, Lynx told her of the action at the fort.

"What are you going to do, Lynx?"

"Well, first of all, I'm going over to the other side of the thumb and get the mackinaw," he told her. He saw the questioning look in O'Hara's eyes, and explained: "I hid the big boat and the peltry upriver from the fort about as far as we are this side of it, almost directly across the thumb from here."

In that vicinity the Missouri swung almost due south to the mouth of the Musselshell where the fort stood, then abruptly turned north again, leaving a narrow thumb between the two channels. By water, two

points on opposite sides of the thumb might be a considerable distance apart, but overland the distance would be very small. And Lesky had taken advantage of the fact.

"Just a precaution I decided on in case the trader turned out to be what Raymond is," he declared. "Then if I had trouble, having seen me come in from downriver, they'd come this way and not think of looking upriver."

"I hope you did a good job of hiding it, son," O'Hara declared soberly. "This country's swarming with beggar Indians. When they bring in fur, Raymond gives them trade whisky and asks no questions. Plenty of trappers have been scalped and caches robbed so one of them could hit Raymond for another drink. You better wait until dark. It ain't far off now. Be better not to be seen passing the fort, anyhow."

"It would be better," Lesky corrected him, "to be long gone from this country by dark. But I reckon it's too late for that now. We'll hide your boat out on down a ways. Then if they stumble onto this camp they may figure we've pulled out in the bigger boat and just left the canoe."

FULL dark lay over the land when Lesky and Big Red got back to the tiny camp after hiding O'Hara's bull-boat farther down the river. Mosquitoes had risen from the stagnant places and the wet grass along the river where the air still lay damp and heavy from the afternoon's heat. Already Diana was having a constant, frantic fight to keep the vicious insects off.

"I hope you were a tomboy before your dad sent you to finishing school to make a lady of you," Lesky said, grinning faintly. "Because we can't build a smudge fire, and I don't want to risk taking you with us to get the mackinaw . . . so there's only one other way."

He led her to a tall, thick-trunked cottonwood with widespreading limbs. "You're going to have to climb a tree."

He made a stirrup of his hands for her to step up in to reach the first limbs. He was surprised when she put her foot into it, swung into the tree when he lifted her, and began climbing without a word of protest.

Almost immediately she was lost from even Lesky's keen sight, hidden by the heavy foliage between her and the ground. And he was pleased, realizing that as a hiding place it was better than anywhere he could have left her on the ground.

"You didn't think I could do it, did you?" her low voice rang down to him, taunting, minutes later.

"Just roost up there and don't do any clucking around until we get back," he shot back lightly, gliding away into the night then with a chuckle at the indignant gasp his inference drew.

"Gals like her ain't met up with every day," Big Red declared with quiet admiration as they headed overland.

"She's improving right along," Lesky conceded. "The more finishing-school varnish that gets knocked off, the better I like her. I got to be sure it's just varnish, though, and not her real shell. I wouldn't of had her for a present when we left her Dad's fort at Stove Prairie. A little schooling sure curdles up a female's brain."

They lapsed into silence then, jogging along at the mile-eating gait natural to mountain men, almost completely noiseless upon their moccasined feet. They left the sound of the river behind them, traveling through grass and sand for a time. And then once more they heard the sound of rushing water, this time from the night directly ahead. Suddenly Lesky stopped. For several minutes he stood motionless, listening intently.

"Injuns!" Big Red exclaimed in a harsh whisper.

THEY moved on cautiously, like two drifting shadows. The excited yammering became plain above the sound of the water.

"Sound like they'd stumbled onto a barrel of firewater," O'Hara muttered.

"Or something that would buy a barrel," Lesky suggested grimly. "We ain't far from where I left that mackinaw of beaver."

"They've found it, then. They'll be deciding to boat on down to the fort in about another minute."

"Then we'd better give them something else to think about, and in a hurry."

"Let's split up, surround them, get them in a crossfire and make them think we're a whole army," Big Red suggested gleefully. He patted the Sharps he had retrieved from its hiding place in the bull-boat. "Old Persuader's chewing on a cud of buckshot

that'd stampede a grizzly bear. I got him muzzle-loaded."

"I guess we'll have to try it," Lesky nodded. "But let's get that boat into the river as quick as possible. Killing Indians isn't the idea this time."

"If I ain't took enough scalps by the time you get the beaver traveling, you jest float on without me," O'Hara chuckled.

He slipped off into the darkness then, and Lesky began circling the other way. The light of the early stars was still dim. Lesky reached a point on the river just below the Indians without being detected.

He could understand the Indians' talk now, he was so close. They were arguing over who had found the hidden mackinaw with its precious load. Lynx felt thankful for the division among them, sure it would enable him to reach point-blank range before they discovered him. Perhaps he forgot a little of his former caution in his eagerness. For suddenly he met head-on with a dark shadow that loomed out of the night before him.

For one instant the trapper and the brave faced each other, frozen with surprise. Then before Lesky could trigger, the brave erupted a bloodcurdling war-cry. He snatched out a gleaming knife. But the trapper's bullet shook him, spun him sideways and dumped him on his face to the ground before he could get into action.

His yell and the sound of the shot had torn the lid off, Lesky knew. He charged forward. The time for caution had passed —he had to catch the Indians before they could scatter, like so many wolves, to stalk him. Or, even worse, run from the fight and shove off with the plew-laden mackinaw.

But Big Red O'Hara opened the party. Pandemonium broke loose before the roar of the Sharps became an echo. Death-songs of the wounded rose, weird and terrible, mingled with the war-whoops of the brave ones and the cries of terror from the weak.

Lesky dropped into the shelter of a big driftwood log and slammed two fast shots into the confused Indians. Then the Sharps spoke again, its heavy .50 caliber lead blasting clear through one Indian and bowling over another behind him.

The survivors stampeded, three frantically shoving the fur-laden mackinaw into the current and the others flinging themselves into the brush.

DESPERATELY Lesky charged after the trio escaping with the boat. He knocked one rolling into deep water with a quick shot. But the current sucked at the boat suddenly, sweeping it away from the bank while the remaining pair of braves scrambled aboard. He knew if they reached Raymond, he'd have one chance in a thousand of ever recovering the fur.

Quickly Lesky shucked out of his elkskins. Leaving them and his gun in the opening where Big Red could find them, he plunged into the racing current. The mackinaw was only a black, bobbing speck in the darkness far ahead. The trapper swam frantically in long, sweeping, powerful strokes.

By hard swimming, Lesky finally overtook the now swiftly traveling mackinaw. He held to the stern a moment, catching his breath. Then with a lunge he hauled himself upward. He was halfway into the boat before the Indians were aware of him.

The brave nearest the stern dropped his pole and sprang at the trapper with a cry of hate, his knife gleaming faintly in the dim light. There was no time to swing a leg over the side and pull himself out of the water. Only his remarkable sense of timing saved him. At the last moment, one of his steel-fingered hands released its hold on the boat and caught the wrist behind the knife that was driving down upon him. With the other arm and his legs he shoved away from the boat, dragging the Indian with him.

They plunged beneath the surface, rolling over and over as the current swept them through the depths, each man fighting with his free hand to get at the other's throat and strangle him. Even in the icy water Lesky's body seemed to become feverish from the violent exertion. He could not break the Indian's hold on his knife without using both hands—and his free hand was busy warding off the talon-like fingers with which the brave sought his throat.

His lungs seemed ready to burst when at last, lunging, he again broke surface, still fighting to break the Indian's grip on the knife. He found himself, for the moment, on top. The brave had not yet surfaced—only his hand, in Lesky's grip, and the gleaming steel of the blade.

Gasping a deep breath, Lesky shoved the Indian down again, following him under. But in that one instant when his throat was unguarded, a vise-like grip closed upon it. For a moment the feeling of panic surging up within him was a more terrible foe than the Indian. Desperately he downed it. He lashed out hard where the brave's head should be and knew a thrill of satisfaction as he connected with flesh and bone.

For an instant the grip on his throat loosened. Quickly he jerked away. But an arm wrapped around his waist like a tenacious coil, pulling him in close to the Indian. Then, suddenly, the knife-hand was empty. But when he released it to get added leverage with which to break the death-lock in which the brave had clutched him, that arm snaked around his body as well. He realized the Indian was drowning, in the grip of terrible involuntary struggles to save himself. And he was being dragged down to death in that strangling torrent with his enemy.

ONCE more his body was burning as if with fever, and his lungs again were near the limit of their endurance. He knew he must break the Indian's lock upon him, now or never. For in another instant he would not have strength enough.

The searching fingers of one hand caught at the brave's scalp-lock. With the other hand doubled into a rock-like fist, he drove at the Indian's temple. His knuckles seemed to shatter under the impact. But he felt a quick shudder run through the drowning brave, and the locked arms fell away from him.

For several minutes after he reached the surface, all he had time to do was to breathe, drifting along with the current. Then he glanced around to find the mackinaw and was surprised to find it still not far ahead, although the remaining brave was at the stern pole adding all the speed possible. The underwater struggle that had seemed to take hours had, in reality, lasted but short minutes.

He contented himself to drift along with only his head above water for many minutes until his breathing became normal. Finally he forged ahead, closing the gap between him and the boat.

Still undetected by the poling brave, he dove under, driving forward until his fingers touched the firm, slender body of the pole. He surfaced quickly, lunging back against the pole at the same time. And the surprised Indian was jerked off balance and hurled into the torrent.

Lesky went for the boat then with desperate strokes, for he had not regained enough strength yet to be equal to another underwater combat with a killer brave. His fingers closed upon the low-riding stern, and he hauled himself aboard.

His legs felt weak and spent, his chest ached and his lungs were a fiery agony. But he turned to meet the brave, like a white savage facing a red.

IF YOU like fast-action stories of the frontier, you're sure to enjoy Walt Coburn's great cattle-land novel, "The 77's Brand-Blot Army". It's in the August STAR WESTERN, along with *five* other short novels by Roan, Savage, Bonham, Latham and Olmsted. Get it at your newsstand July 12th!

CHAPTER THREE

Captured!

THE Indian popped back to the surface and took one surging stroke back toward the mackinaw before he saw Lesky there, waiting and ready. He paused, treading water for a moment, his face masking whatever emotions he felt.

Perhaps he thought of his fellow brave who had rushed the lithe-bodied trapper, with a drawn knife against the white man's empty hands. And perhaps the chances of dying, as his red brother had died, seemed too great; dying at night was bad medicine, leaving a brave's soul to wander forever in the desolate blackness outside the happy hunting-ground. Suddenly he turned shoreward.

But his going left Lesky with no sense of victory. Big Red O'Hara was somewhere behind, and Diana was hidden out ahead. He had to get to each of them before the Musselshell trader did. And he was riding a heavy boat on a wild river with no means of guiding it, else he would have beached the mackinaw and hurried back to find O'Hara. But both poles had gone overboard.

Quickly the young trapper began shifting the heavy bales of plew, loading down the boat on one side until it had a decided list.

Slowly the current began to push the heavy mackinaw shoreward.

But before the boat drifted close enough to the left bank, the sharp bend at the mouth of the Musselshell swept into view. A strong cross-current sucked at the loaded mackinaw and dragged it back into mid-river, sending it toward the boat landing at the fort just ahead.

Seeing where the river was carrying him, Lynx leaped forward to the bow, and, on his knees, began stroking deep and hard, using both hands together as a makeshift paddle.

The boat struck the turbulent confluence of Missouri and Musselshell a moment later. Lesky had to shift his weight hard against the left side to counterbalance the overload he had put on the right.

For a moment, as the heavy craft plowed into the white water, it seemed it would capsize in spite of all he could do. Then, in the next instant, the mackinaw was dumped into the calm backwater near the landing at Fort Musselshell as the current doubled back and raced northeast. The boat's momentum carried it on until it struck the piling and stopped, rolling gently.

Lesky's first thought was to rustle up some kind of a pole, to enable him to navigate, and get underway again as soon as possible.

A cool night breeze struck him as he climbed atop the landing, and he realized that he was still naked from his swim to recover the plew-laden mackinaw. He dropped back into the boat, and from among the bales of fur searched out the small pack of his personal belongings. There was little left of the bundle when he removed the extra pair of elk-skins and the new buckskin shirt.

BEFORE he finished dressing he became aware of the strange, desolate silence that hung over the fort. When he and Diana had slipped past in the canoe the night before, after hiding the mackinaw upstream, the place had been filled with the hilarious, ribald yells and whoops of carousing men. He noticed now that the landing was entirely deserted, except for one lone canoe, of all the fishing craft and the bull-boats that had been clustered thickly around it.

Warning tingled through the young mountain man. He realized that the danger Raymond presented was no longer concentrated here at the fort. The fort was deserted—which meant that danger now lurked in the shadows ahead along the river.

Speculation was in his eyes as he looked at the landing now. He reached a decision and began working the heavy boat along the thick pilings toward the river end. There, between the double row of supports, reaching shoreward, was an opening wide enough for the mackinaw to slip into. He pushed the boat in under the dock, stern first. Then he threw a hitch, below water, around the first piling with a long rope attached to the bow. Swinging from the deck of the landing, he gave the boat a hard shove as his feet left it, sending it gliding on into the inpenetrable gloom far back toward the shore. Here, at least until daylight, would be the safest hiding place for the fur along that stretch of the river. For contacting Diana and Big Red, with Raymond and his white and red hellions strung out downriver, was not going to be a simple job.

Minutes later, with deft strokes, he sent his borrowed canoe into the racing current. Quickly the deserted landing faded into the night behind him.

He forced the light craft slowly across the current, until he was drifting along more slowly in quieter water near the left bank. Soon he found the first bull-boat, tied up to a tree overhanging the water. He cut it loose and shoved it out into the current. A little farther on he found three canoes, and set them adrift too.

Lesky was within a short distance of the camp when he found the main body of the craft from the fort. A hard grin was on his lips as he set them adrift. Some of that bloodthirsty crew were going to have to

swim the river if they got back to the fort tonight.

From the shoreward brush beyond, he heard the questing call of a night bird. But his keen ears caught the tiny imperfection from which human imitations, at the very best, are never quite free. It told him only what he already knew: that braves were on the prowl, stalking human prey.

Lesky let the canoe drift on, past the overhanging brush where he had hidden his canoe, and on to the place where O'Hara's bull-boat was hidden. There he left the canoe, so that if he missed Big Red, and the giant trapper reached his boat, he would know Lesky had been there.

After that it soon became a battle of wits, as the trapper worked his way back toward the tree in which he had left Diana. It was a deadly game in which the stake was life, and he was pitted against children of nature whose favorite entertainment was the hunt.

Finally, however, he reached the great cottonwood. Mosquitoes were raising fiery welts on his neck and face, but he dared not risk the noise a slap might make. Fanning them away was useless. It required the stoic calm of an Indian simply to endure them without distraction, keeping fully alert.

WITH an easy bound, Lesky reached the lower limb of the cottonwood and pulled himself up. A moment later a shadowy figure glided slowly, noiselessly, from the surrounding brush and stopped directly below him. Lesky froze, begrudging even the slight movement of breathing.

The brave uttered the low call of a night-bird, like the one Lesky had heard before. From somewhere in the night beyond came an answer.

Lynx waited tensely for the Indian to move on. But the brave only stirred slightly, seemingly undecided about something. Slowly he turned his head, and the hidden mountain man just above him realized with quick alarm that it was something that had come to the brave's keen nose about which he was uncertain. For he was intently testing the air in all directions.

Unconsciously Lesky reached for the knife he had taken from his pack when he dressed. His hand touched the new buckskin shirt as he did so. And he realized suddenly that it was the smell of the new skin clothing that had betrayed him. At that moment the brave glanced up at the tree.

Like the cat for which he was named, Lynx sprang. The fingers of one hand closed on the Indian's throat before he could utter a sound of alarm. The knife drove deep and true. Only one long shudder ran through the brave before he lay still.

It had taken hardly a moment; yet the slight struggle had been heard. Lesky leaped back into the cottonwood only an instant before another brave materialized from the black brush. There had been no time to conceal the dead tribesman.

Instantly the investigating brave raised the cry of an alarmed jay. A moment later one of Raymond's trappers crashed out of the brush. Another Indian glided from the gloom. Then Raymond himself appeared. Sight of the dead brave threw him into a fit of cursing.

"Get torches! Spread out! Go over this brush like a comb! They're going to slip away from you damn' fools yet!" he raged, forgetting all pretense of silence. He stooped and with savage snatches, here and there, gathered a handful of tinder and lighted a fire. "Get a torch and keep them away from the river," he shouted, piling on more fuel as more of his men drifted in from the brush. "Hurry!"

LESKY knew that he and Diana had to leave before the fire grew any brighter. It was a slim chance, but their only one to reach the river. Likely Raymond would think of firing the brush before long.

He turned, choking back an exclamation of alarm when he found Diana on the limb just above, almost beside him. He had caught no sound of her coming.

"My buckskin blood," she whispered, smiling, he thought, as if they were at a picnic.

"It's time to leave," he said, so low she had to lean forward to catch the words. He worked cautiously to the back side of the thick tree, away from the growing fire. His moccasins made no sound as he hit the ground. Then he lifted the girl down beside him.

"You better pray that your buckskin ancestors stay with you between here and that river," he breathed in her ear. "We're go-

ing to need all the luck we can scare up between us."

Moving slowly, sometimes only inches at a time, they worked their way beyond the farthest reaches of the growing light of the fire Raymond had kindled. Several times incoming braves or company trappers passed so close they could have reached out and touched them. But they neared the river and had still been undetected.

Lesky turned his ear to the night ahead. When he could detect not the slightest sound of danger, he decided that all of Raymond's men had been drawn in to the fire. He raised up from his stomach, getting to his feet.

"I think we'd better make time now," he whispered to Diana. He led off. His canoe was hidden in the brush only twenty yards away, and a sense of relief began to steal through him. He hurried forward, anxious to get the girl into the canoe and out on the river.

In any kind of gambling a run of luck can go sour with stunning quickness. Lesky was almost upon the water's edge when a huge shadow appeared before him. A guttural croak verified his instant recognition of that great bulk. Raymond's dummy, who had cut Big Red to pieces with his whip, stubbornly barred the way.

A MOMENT'S hesitation would have been too long. Lesky drove forward before the slow-witted giant could identify him as friend or foe. His head struck the giant's broad belly like a battering ram. The big fellow, taken completely off guard by the sudden attack, staggered backward, floundered wildly as he lost his footing, and crashed through the brush into the river.

Lesky spun, meaning to grab Diana's arm and, if there was no time to free the canoe, plunge with her into the river. He found her already struggling in the grasp of a man he could not see, except for the hand clamped over the girl's mouth which in the gloom seemed like the hand of a white man. And other sinister shadows seemed to be leaping at him from every direction. He did not think of leaping into the river, just behind. He met them head-on, leaping toward them, knife flashing.

The savage attack had come in complete silence, with no warning. But now screams and savage yells rent the night silence. How many times he drew fresh blood in that wild fight, Lesky never knew. But he had hope until the very last instant of fighting through to Diana and breaking free. The safety of the river was so near.

But a last rush came which he could not cut down or turn. Then he tripped over the bodies of some who had fallen. The survivors were upon him like a pack of snarling dogs.

"It worked, Raymond! It worked!" somewhere a high-pitched voice was bawling as he went under. "He walked right into it, just like you planned." Lesky's disappointment turned bitter, giving him insane strength as he fought on, his body writhing savagely in spite of his captors' best efforts to pin him.

He kicked one leg free, lunged fiercely to one side, swinging the leg up to get added momentum. He felt other holds loosening. In another moment he might have torn free. But as new hope flashed through him, a heavy club suddenly smashed down from somewhere, almost tearing his head off.

He heard Diana scream. He remembered someone holding down his head so hard his nose was flattened against the earth. Then thought drifted away and he was wandering in a black void.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ordeal by Fire

LESKY'S arms were pinioned behind his back with thongs and his body was full of aches when consciousness again returned. He found himself in a dirty barroom which he knew without being told was the rotgut dive Raymond ran at the fort.

"Are you all right, Lynx?" an anxious murmur sounded nearby. He turned his eyes, and though his sight had not yet cleared, he recognized the hazy image he saw and felt relieved that Diana was here with him.

He nodded his head in answer to her question, and instantly wished he had not. The slight movement had set up a terrific throbbing inside his bruised skull.

"Feels like a grizzly slapped me alongside the ear," he muttered, closing his eyes tightly against the pain.

"I thought they had killed you," Diana

whispered. "I'm sure they would have if Raymond hadn't been afraid he couldn't find the fur. He's afraid you left Big Red with it and that O'Hara will pull out if he doesn't find it quickly."

The opening of a door sounded and then the thud of footsteps, causing Diana to lapse into silence.

"Is he awake?" an icy voice questioned a moment later. Lesky recognized it for Raymond's. But he kept his eyes closed while the drumming in his head eased up.

There was an instant's silence. Then the trader's tone had changed to a snarl. "Answer me, damn you! Has he come to? Or will I have to take the toe of my boot to you, young lady?"

"Your manners haven't improved any more than your stink, Raymond," Lynx said, opening his eyes. Raymond was standing over him. A thin smile crinkled the tight, pallid skin stretched over the man's bony face.

"Still full of fancy talk, are you?" he purred, his cold eyes gleaming. "The thing I like about you, mister, is that you're able to back up your brave talk. If I only had a man on my side that could fight like you can, I'd own every trapper in the Northwest before many years. But no—I suppose you wouldn't." He regarded the bound trapper musingly.

"You will help me though, before you die," he said. "The money-bags in New Orleans served notice last fall they were pulling out their trade goods and abandoning this fort if the fur harvest wasn't better this year. That would have been very bad for me. I would have been left with no blind for my own private business with the Indians: rifles and gunpowder. And the fur catch this year was the poorest it has ever been—until you came along."

LYNX said nothing. The trader went on after a moment, "But I don't have to worry about fur any more, do I now? It was only a penny-ante game when I started after the plews you and O'Hara walked away with this afternoon. Since then I find there are real stakes to be played for. Those Indians have gotten in with news of the mackinaw you hid out up river, Lesky."

"They should have told you, then, that two braves got away with the boat," Lesky said.

Raymond did not take his eyes from the trapper as he called, "Little Wolf!"

A moment later a sullen-faced brave shuffled to the trader's side, fire glinting in his eyes as he stared at Lesky. His hair and his moccasins still were damp from a recent soaking.

"Little Wolf wants to cut your heart out for killing his brothers," Raymond announced pointedly. "I'll keep him away from you if you tell me where to find that mackinaw."

"You'll know all the devils in hell by their first names before you ever get any help from me," Lesky vowed quietly. "You'll never see that mackinaw."

In his own ears his words had the ring of an idle boast. He knew that, the way the cards were stacked, neither he nor Diana would live to know whether Raymond found the plews or not.

For himself he had no real worry, for a man's time came sometime anyhow. But Diana was another matter. If the trader's word had been good, if there had been any kind of honor in the man, Lesky would have used the furs to bargain for her safety. But Raymond, by his very nature, made that proposition ridiculous.

"Little Wolf's way would be too quick!" Raymond finally snapped. "I think the Dummy can do the job for me better. Go, Little Wolf," he dismissed the Indian.

As the Indian disappeared, Raymond whistled sharply, one short summons. There was the sound of scraping feet at the head of the crude bar. The Dummy's little bullet-like head and misshapen face appeared above the bar, then his massive shoulders and thick torso as he pushed himself erect. Between the palms of his hands he clutched a long-necked bottle. The clammy skin of his face was slightly flushed and his little close-set eyes were red and glassy. He seemed more like a great, bare-faced animal than anything human.

"THE nice thing about Dummy is that he doesn't understand too much about anything but his own work," Raymond mused craftily as the giant lumbered forward. No matter how much I make, Dummy won't be thinking he should have a split. His only vice is his thirst for liquor—and blood. But I manage to keep him happy." The trader chuckled.

He made signs as if wrapping something around his head as the Dummy shuffled up to him. In response, a gleam of understanding came into the lusterless eyes. The dwarf-brained giant drew a wide lace of rawhide from around his middle.

"What is he going to do, Lynx?" Diana whispered, her voice hoarse with dread. "What—"

"He's going to see if a hard twist of rawhide around your friend's skull won't make him more talkative," Raymond answered. "It's very effective."

The giant's pig-eyes gleamed as he knotted a loop in the rawhide. He grasped Lesky by the nape of the neck, holding him as in a vise while he slipped the loop over his head. Then he inserted a stick, twisting it rapidly until the cord was tight around Lesky's forehead.

Raymond came over and kneeled beside the bound trapper. "Better change your mind, Lesky," he said. "No? All right, Dummy!"

Slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time, the giant began to tighten the rawhide. The thong was a band of steel, closing inexorably on Lesky's skull. He could feel the veins starting out on his forehead, and cold sweat dampened his face.

At half-minute intervals the dummy moved the stick slightly around in its circle —an almost imperceptible twist, but each time it was as if the steel band had been struck with a sledgehammer. Lesky gritted his teeth until the jaws ached, and bore it in silence.

Through a haze of pain, he could hear Raymond's harsh voice, monotonously, over and over: "Where are those plews?" The words began to go round and round in the thunder that filled his head, and gradually they lost all meaning.

Suddenly the terrible pressure relaxed, and the cord was removed. Lesky's eyes cleared. Raymond was smiling down at him. "You're tough, Lesky," he said. "I can see there's no point in going on with this—Dummy would only crush your skull, and that wouldn't do either of us any good. Luckily, there's another way."

He stood up and drew a derringer out of his pocket. "Can you see all right, Lesky? Think clearly?"

"I can see a face I'm going to smash," growled Lynx.

"All right, then. I dislike to do this, but you force me to it. You see this gun? It throws a very small bullet, but one that can kill a man—or a woman."

Lynx involuntarily turned to look at Diana.

"That's right," said Raymond. "I'm through fooling with you. Unless you tell me where to find that fur, I'm going to put a bullet in the girl's stomach. She'll die very slowly. . . . Well, Lesky?"

THIS was the payoff, Lesky knew. Nothing was to be gained by revealing the mackinaw's hiding place—somehow he had to stall, play for time, hoping that Big Red would show up before it was too late.

Suddenly his shoulders slumped. He tried to kill the defiance in his eyes. He was no actor, but this was one act that had to be good.

"I guess—you win," he muttered, his eyes turning to the floor. At his side Diana gasped.

"Lynx! Don't do it!"

"You promise not to harm the girl, and I'll tell you."

"I'll promise not to shoot her."

"All right. Look in the brush along this bank about half a mile below where you caught us, across the river."

Raymond's eyes kindled with triumph. "Fine," he breathed. "Now I'll check up on that, my friend, and—"

The sound of a great commotion boiled in from outside. Raymond glanced at the Dummy. "Get your whip! Watch them!" He pointed at the prisoners. "Quick!"

The giant trotted behind the bar and returned with a coiled bull-whip which he fondled in his big hands as if it were something alive. Raymond hurried to the door.

The door burst open just before he reached it. And Lesky blinked his eyes hard, not wanting to believe what they saw. For Big Red O'Hara, almost as bloody as when the whip-wielding Dummy had finished with him, was shoved inside by two company trappers.

Lesky swallowed hard, as if downing a bitter pill that was too much to swallow. But his fighting spirit still blazed. And then, as O'Hara was shoved roughly on toward him, the big redhead caught his friend's eye and winked. "They got me," he muttered from the corner of his mouth

as he was flung down near Lesky, "but not before I poured some mud in their tea. Sit tight."

"My luck—" Raymond began expansively, "is running—"

He never finished, for at that moment a terrific blast let loose outside, shattering the window panes and making the whole structure tremble.

"The powder house!" a wild cry raised above the screams of wounded men. And on the heels of that cry came another: "The fur shed! The fur shed's afire!"

A strickened look crossed Raymond's face, and then he was racing for the door.

"Come on, you fools!" he raged at the two company men who had brought Big Red. "Keep them, Dummy," he ordered his big watchdog. And then he was gone, the two trappers just behind him.

Big Red moved quickly to Lesky.

"In my hair!" he whispered, ducking to put his head close to Lesky's rawhide-bound hands. "They missed that hideout."

Quickly the young trapper's deft fingers explored his friend's heavy mat of hair. His fingers touched metal, and he drew out a thin blade almost as fine as light wire.

Quickly he cut O'Hara's bonds. Then Big Red grasped the blade and went to work on the thongs that held Lesky. The action had taken but a minute, but the Dummy had been watching suspiciously. Now it became plain to even his weak mind what was happening. He croaked angily.

"Take care of Diana and get moving," Lesky cried, leaping forward. Dummy whipped his lash back across his massive shoulder, aiming straight for Lynx's eyes.

The trapper warded off the smoking leather, catching the lash on his forearm, just as O'Hara had that afternoon. He made a feint backward, as if meaning to wrestle for the whip, as Big Red had. And the Dummy stepped back, his thick shoulders heaving with power.

Too late, he realized that Lesky had not waited for that vicious jerk to bring him forward. The trapper sprang when the motion was already started. The Dummy could not save himself, for he was off balance, his weight already thrown backward for a heavy pull. Lesky's driving head smashed into his unprotected belly and sent him floundering in a heavy, awkward fall.

LESKY sprinted for the door, the gasping Dummy no longer a menace. He leaped outside just behind O'Hara and Diana. The fort was lit up as bright as day. Some excited Raymond man had dropped a new Sharps near the doorway, and the fleeing trapper snatched it up.

"To the landing!" he cried at the others above the uproar around them. They raced off, and he followed, covering their rear.

They had almost reached the shadows near the landing, beyond the reach of the firelight, before they were sighted. But lead came in a hail then.

Lynx breathed a prayer of thanks as the shadows closed behind Diana and O'Hara, shielding them from danger. He was only a jump away from safety, behind the cargo sheds, when a hard blow struck his shoulder. It spun him sideways and dumped him hard on his face.

He rolled on and up to his feet, never losing his grip on the gun. He raced on, hot lead plunking into the shed wall behind him. But his left arm hung useless.

"Where now?" Big Red questioned as Lesky pounded up.

"Into the water! You'll find a rope around that left front piling and the other end's on the boat. Bring her out fast!"

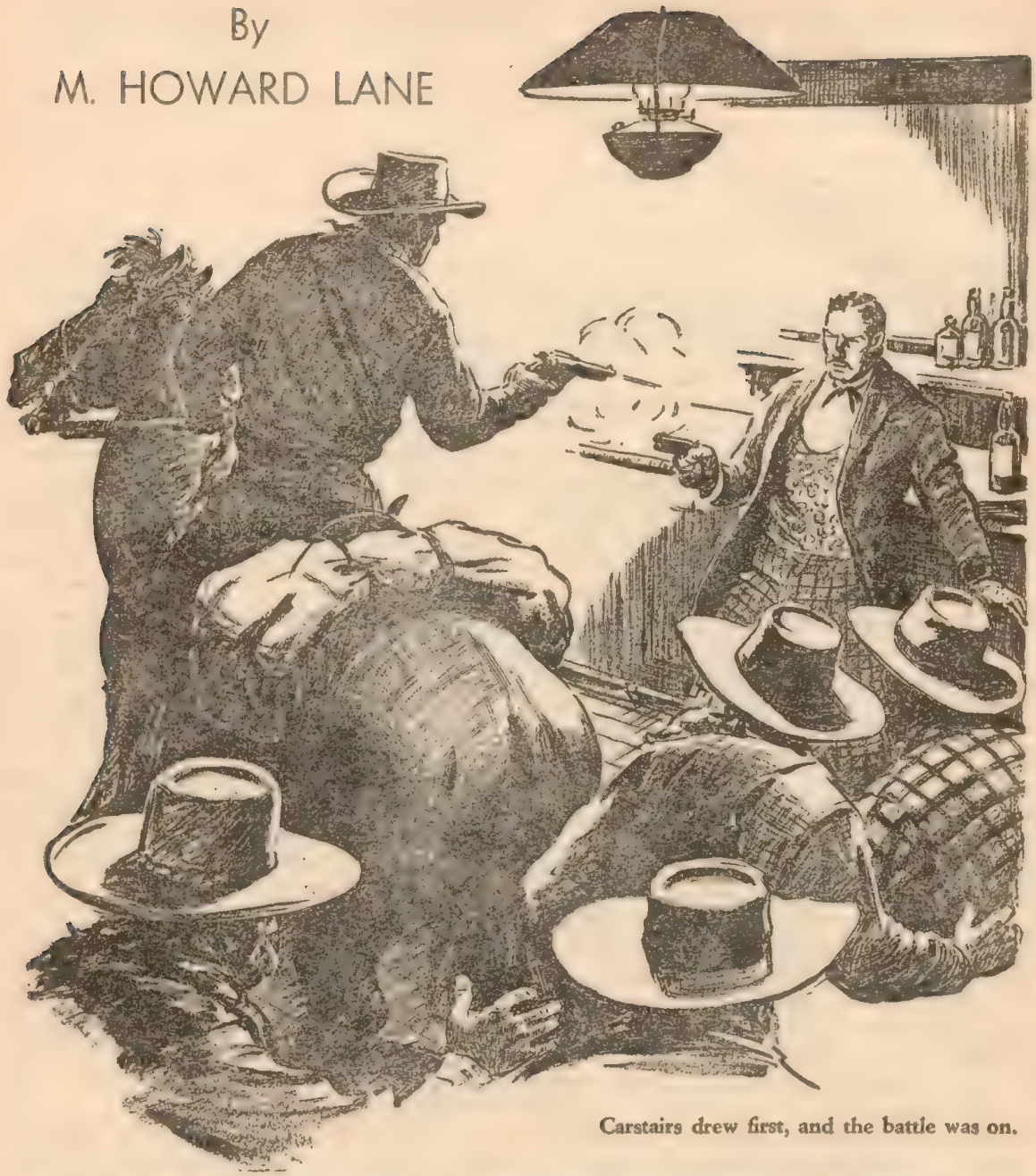
He turned, caught sight of a shadow following. Dropping down with the Sharps resting across his knee, he triggered a single shot. A death-scream rent the turbulent night air. Then Diana was tugging at him and he followed, jumping from the landing into the long mackinaw. A moment later they were speeding through the night with the fast river, and Big Red was chuckling heartily.

"I guess we run a buckskin brand on them renegades a mile high," he declared, immensely pleased. "That Raymond won't be no trader tomorrow."

"I'll do my celebrating when we get safe to Fort Union," Lesky decided soberly. And as an afterthought he added, "After I find a big stern-wheeler." He had to let Diana know at once, that nothing had changed his decision about that. Before they ever got as far as O'Hara's bull-boat, even, she would have discovered he was wounded and be giving him the orders. A man had to get in a say for himself when he had the chance!

THE END

By
M. HOWARD LANE



Carstairs drew first, and the battle was on.

DEATH RIDES THE GOLD TRAIL

The undercover bosses of Grizzly Bear figured that worthless sand, in Johnny Cotton's gold pokes, would send him to a traitor's doom. But they didn't reckon with the sand in that youngster's craw—enough to buck a combine menacing every miner on Grizzly Creek!

JOHNNY COTTON awoke with the dawn, and stretched his stubby frame beneath the rumpled blankets. Outside, he could hear the cheerful morning song of birds, and the muted music of Grizzly Creek down the slope from his Sierra cabin. The sound of the stream mocked him with its promise of El Dorado gold; and then a wry, stubborn grin twisted his lips.

"Mebbe this will be your lucky day, kid," he muttered, and swung bare feet to the rough floor of his cabin.

A solid chunk of man in long underwear, Johnny reached for his pants and red wool shirt, and his eyes rose, as they did every morning, to the pitifully small poke of dust resting on a shelf above the sheet-iron stove across the single room. Most of the prospectors along Grizzy Creek, he reflected with a touch of bitterness, hid their gold well, but he hadn't managed to save enough in six months to tempt any gold-camp thief.

"And still y' keep right on plugging," Johnny Cotton spoke the words as he pulled on heavy socks and long boots. "Sometimes I'm danged if I know why you do it!"

But Johnny Cotton did know. He went over the reasons as he warmed bacon and beans at the stove, and they were simple enough. Simple as the motive that was bringing fresh hundreds each month across the Oregon Trace and Overland Trail to California. This was the fall of 1851, and two years before the cry of gold at Coloma had startled a world from lethargy. Gold in California! Johnny Cotton had heard the word on his dad's Indiana farm, and he'd stuffed a few clothes and such into a clean flour sack and slung it from the end of a pole across his shoulder.

There'd been tears in his mother's eyes as he'd bid both of them goodbye. "I'm heading for California," he'd told them simply. "A cuss my size ought to be able to hook up with some caravan at Council Grove, and earn his board and keep across the Plains. And when I get to California I aim to dig enough gold to buy us one of them big Spanish ranchos I've heard about. Then you folks can come on out, and set in the shade for the rest of your lives!"

It was enough reason to bring a man to California. Johnny Cotton had "seen the elephant." That's what they called it when you got your first look at Sacramento's vast valley from the notch of Emigrant Pass. The sight had made his heart beat a little faster, and firmed his resolve to own some of that rich land. But first a man had to dig gold, make a stake.

Sacramento was *El Dorado's* hub, and from there like the spoke of a Conestoga wheel, men were moving to camps that already stretched a hundred miles in each direction.

To Hangtown, fifty miles east, Johnny Cotton had come, and the talk there was that Grizzy Bear, twenty miles deeper into Sierra heights, was the up-and-coming camp.

Shanks-mare had brought Johnny here, and the price of pick, shovel and gold pan in Ike Walters' General Store had about knocked the breath from him. The cost of everything else had done the same thing. A man had to dig a heap of gold even to buy bacon and beans at two dollars a pound.

Ike Walters, speculatively watching the big, young farmer make his purchases, had offered meager advice. "Thar's a claim up nigh the head of Grizzly Creek, I hear, that's been abandoned by one of them rainbow chasers who's always lookin' for better ground. If you move fast you might preempt it before somebody beats you to the punch. There's a cabin on it, which'll come in right handy when the nights git cold, and you'll have nice neighbors on the claim above. Old man White, his wife and daughter are workin' it, and the daughter, Marianne, is a mighty pert filly—"

The Whites had been friendly, and as he broke hardtack, Johnny was honest enough to admit that maybe one reason he was clinging so stubbornly to a claim that hardly bought his grub was because of Marianne White.

But there was another reason, too, and it was one that Johnny Cotton had kept strictly to himself. The gold was here on his claim, plenty of it, but it was scattered thinly through gravel and sand, for Grizzy Creek was wide and shallow where it crossed his claim. A man could starve trying to pan it, but if he had one of those newfangled sluices prospectors were starting to use, he could reap a golden harvest from this claim.

And that was the chief hope that had kept him plugging day after day, for there was always the chance that a man might hit a pocket laden with egg-sized nuggets. If he did that, the cleanup would amount to enough on Walters' gold scales to purchase lumber from Sid Carstairs' mill to build a sluice. The thought drove him out into the chill morning.

But this day's cleanup was like the rest had been through weary months. Less, even. There were hardly enough flakes and tiny pellets to cover the palm of his square

hand after drying and blowing away the black sand his pan had recovered.

JOHNNY took his poke and sat on the log steps leading into his cabin, as he did at the end of each afternoon, and carefully added the day's cleanup to it. "A man with good sense," he told himself gloomily, "would make more hiring out at day wages to some of them lucky gents down the creek!"

And that was the worst of it. Grizzly Creek, along its tumbling course to join the American, was providing gold aplenty for the lucky ones who had the right claims. The merchants and saloon-keepers in Grizzly Bear were reaping a fat harvest from Argonauts who'd hit it right. On his one weekly trip to the camp, Johnny had watched roaring prospectors proffer their pokes to barkeeps with the offer 'to see how much you c'n raise in a pinch'. That was what they paid for forty-rod freighted in from Hangtown.

"More for a danged drink than I've made all day!" he grunted.

His eyes shifted involuntarily upcreek to where supper smoke billowed cheerfully from the chimney of the White cabin. Marianne was carrying a pail of water from the creek. She was a good quarter-mile away, but bridging the distance with his eyes was easy enough. Calico clothed the girl's slender figure, and late sunlight caught in the corn-yellow of her hair.

"Like gold!" Johnny said the words softly, and his eyes turned involuntarily to the mocking brightness of the creek.

"I've got to make a cleanup." The words were like gall in his throat. "Got to build a sluice and get it operating before winter gits here!"

A clear call interrupted the somber train of his thoughts. "Come up and have supper with us—" It was Marianne sending her voice downstream. The girl was standing at the doorway of their cabin, and as he turned to look in her direction Johnny saw her stiffen. Her hand went up to shade her eyes, and he knew that she had a clearer view of the Creek trail that passed his cabin than he had himself. Someone, he guessed, must be coming upstream. That was strange because few prospectors came this way. Most of them spent their evenings in the convivial surroundings of Ike Walters' store, or in the tent-roofed saloon that belonged to Dandy Jim Benson.

Still watching the girl, Johnny saw her leave the door, and start at a fast walk toward his cabin. Dodging gray boulders and clumps of snow-brush, she was no more than a hundred yards away when the hail came from downstream.

"Ho there, Johnny Cotton. How be ye?"

That was Ike Walters, astride a beautiful bay mare. He was a small, wizened man, wearing the sober black of a merchant. Flanking him on either side were the other two leading citizens of Grizzy Bear. Dandy Jim Benson was astride a white horse that contrasted sharply with the dark finery of his garb. Tall in the stirrups, he rode with an elegance not matched by the third man —Sid Carstairs, whose short girth filled the saddle like a sack of grain. The lumberman, with his portable mill, had an uncontested monopoly that was netting him a fortune.

Johnny watched the trio turn their mounts and ride straight toward his cabin, and he climbed to his feet.

Marianne had reached his side. Her breath was coming in short gusts. "Why do you suppose those three are coming to see you?" she half-whispered.

Johnny turned his gray eyes to the girl, and shook his touseled head. "It's got me beat," he murmured. "We'll see, though, danged pronto."

His eyes went back to the approaching trio. They reined down, and Johnny felt the impact of their eyes scanning him with a sharpness that he couldn't understand. He forced a smile.

"Light, gents," he began hospitably. "Ain't much I can offer you but a mite of chicory brew."

IKE WALTERS' mouth was a thin, straight slit in the leathery brown of his face. He managed a smile in return. "Thankee, no," he said. "We ain't aimin' to take up a great deal of your time, Cotton, but we'd like to do it in private." His eyes turned to the girl beside the miner.

Johnny felt himself stiffen inwardly. Marianne White was standing just where he hoped she might stand for the rest of his life. "I don't think," he answered the merchant, "that you'll be telling me anything Marianne shouldn't hear."

"*'Sta bueno,* Ike," Dandy Jim Benson said briefly.

"Let's get on with it," Carstairs growled. "Supper's waiting back in camp."

Walters nodded, and again he managed that stiff smile which seemed to hurt his face. "No offense meant, ma'am," he apologized, "but I just figgered this was man's talk that we don't want gittin' out."

Johnny could feel himself growing more puzzled by the minute. "Go ahead," he invited. "If I can do anything for you fellers—"

It seemed to be the opening Walters had been waiting for. "You can," he said, "and for yourself at the same time. Cotton, you may not know it, but some of us has been watching you pretty close for a spell, and we've decided you're the man needed to do a chore for us, and the hull of Grizzly Bear. You're husky, and steady goin', and you couldn't have reached Californy without learnin' a mite about usin' a gun."

Johnny nodded, his sandy brows drawn together. "I can hold my own," he said.

"Good," Walters continued. "Cotton, you may not know this either, but there's a heap of gold stacked in our safes. Some of it belongs to us, and a good share belongs to fellers who've tagged and deposited their pokes at our offices for safe-keeping. Roughly speaking, I'd say between the three of us we've got a hundred thousand locked up. That's a lot of dinero!"

Johnny could agree with the merchant. "It ain't punkin-seed," he nodded.

"One hundred thousand," Walters purred, "that ain't doing ary man in camp a bit of good. Unless gold is workin' for you it ain't wuth much. Now here's what we want. We need an honest man with guts who'll carry it to Hangtown for us, and we're willing to pay ten per cent to the hombre who'll do it!"

"Ten per cent?" Johnny felt the words drawn from him. "Twenty miles. Mister, that's five hundred dollars a mile!"

"Cheap enough for a gold-camp ghost who can get it through to Wells Fargo, and bring back their receipt!" Dandy Jim Benson said smoothly. "Frankly, Cotton, there aren't many men in Grizzy Bear we'd trust with that much gold. They might decide to just keep riding! What's more, there's men in Grizzy Bear watching for just some such move as we aim to make. They're waiting for that gold to go before snow falls, and they'll be on the trail of the man carrying it like a pack of coyotes, if they get an inkling of who it is."

"It ain't an easy chore we're offering you," Walters cut in. "That's why it's worth ten per cent. You ain't been makin' bean money off this claim, so if you was to toss the word around a leetle that you're disgusted and pullin' out, no one will think anything when you ride out of town with a pack mule."

Johnny felt his brain whirling. He dared not look at the girl standing beside him. Ten thousand dollars! Stake enough to buy lumber for the sluice that would make this a paying claim. Money enough to hire help to operate it. Gold to ask a girl to marry him!

The danger? It was a risk worth taking. His brown, square face was sober as he looked up at the waiting trio. "I'm your man," Johnny said.

"No!" The word broke sharply from Marianne. "Oh, Johnny—"

He felt her hand leave his arm quickly, and he heard her stumble like a blind person, and then she was running back the way she had come.

"*'Sta bueno,*" Dandy Jim Benson had ignored the girl's leaving. "We'll see you at the Gold Star, and you can spread the word around that you're pullin' out. Tonight, if you can find a bronc and packhoss. I'll be handy to see you git one—all packed and ready to go!"

It was their last word. Johnny watched the trio whirl and head back the way they'd come. Then he turned his eyes after the fleeing girl. Marianne was almost at the cabin now, and Johnny hoped she would look back. But with her head still bowed she disappeared inside.

FOR the space of a minute, he thought of following her, of trying to talk to her, and then he shook his blond head.

"There ain't no sense in doin' that, son," Johnny counseled himself. "A woman figures things her own way, and you don't want even her to know yet about your idea for building a sluice here. It'll be time enough to see her after you get back from your ride."

And there was enough to do before then. It was dark by the time he finished a

lonely supper, cleaned and loaded his old cap-and-ball pistol, and put his cabin in order. Coming out of the pines, he could see the lights of Grizzly Bear strung like a bright necklace along a shelf above the American. Across the stream was the start of the goat-track road that led to Hangtown, and Sacramento beyond. Johnny Cotton drew a deep breath, and plodded forward.

The lights of the Gold Star blinked cheerily through the gloom. Colt snug against his hip, Johnny stepped through the batwings, and blinked the brightness of hanging lamps from his eyes.

A prospector named Clyde Parma sidled close alongside him, and his black eyes noticed the young miner's revolver. "By damn, Cotton," he chuckled, loud enough for the whole room to hear, "I swan this is the fust time I ever see you come to town with a hog-laig on your hip. Who you gunnin' for, son?" The stocky, black-bearded Parma grinned through broken teeth. "Hope to Hades it ain't me!"

Dandy Jim Benson was at the opposite end of the bar, sleek hair glowing in the light of the lamps. Johnny saw the saloonman's eyes brush him lightly, and he knew that this interchange had been planned ahead of time. It was his turn to play up. Muscles taut as guitar strings, he answered Parma.

"Me?" he said gloomily. "I'm pulling out, mister, if I can find a pack hoss and saddler. That claim of mine pays me about as much as you can raise in a pinch, and I can't see holding it any longer. There's other camps along the Mother Lode, and I'm for seein' some of 'em!"

Parma spat reflectively into the sawdust that layered the floor, and eyed the blunt-faced miner speculatively. "I got a hoss and rat-tailed pack mule doin' nothin' but eatin' their heads off in Dandy Jim's stable out back. They're yours, if we can make a dicker—"

Johnny nodded. He forced eagerness into his voice. "Let's go out and take a look at 'em, Parma. If they suit me, you've sold a couple of broncs."

As they passed Dandy Jim Benson, heading for the rear entrance, Johnny saw the flicker of a smile on the saloonman's lips, and he knew that he'd carried his part well.

Parma led the way to the black bulk of a stable in the rear of the saloon. "They're all ready for you," he whispered. "You done a nice job, son. Won't be no cause for you to unpack. The load's shipshape as she stands. Jest bring back that receipt—"

"I'll do that," Johnny promised.

Ten minutes later, with the pack mule on lead behind the long-legged black Benson had provided, he crossed the American ford and climbed to the stage road. Steady riding, he figured, would put him into Hangtown by morning, and with the opening of the Wells Fargo office he could turn the load of gold at his back into responsible hands and get a receipt in return.

Eyes watchful, Johnny turned down the wagon track that served Grizzly Bear. Pines stippled the slope on his left, and huge boulders rose to his right on the bank of the American. The roar of the river filled the night. Johnny listened to the river, and nodded to himself. It was making enough noise to drown the sound of hoofs. If highwaymen were waiting along this strip, it would be their eyes and not their ears that would warn them of his approach.

"An' if they can see me, I can see them," Johnny muttered. "Hoss, get along. We've got a long ride to make."

The road was a pale, narrow strip between the dark canyon walls. Wind swelled in the pines, bringing a promise of early snows to come. Johnny loosened his Colt in its holster, and his thoughts turned momentarily to the gold he'd earn once he reached Hangtown safely. When he returned, Marianne would understand why he'd undertaken this mission, Johnny told himself.

Five miles were behind him already, he figured. He was making good time. Then he felt the lead-rope tighten in his left hand as the pack mule stumbled. The animal seemed to be going lame.

Johnny cursed under his breath. "My luck!" He tried slowing pace on the downward grade, but the mule stumbled again. Ahead, the trees thinned into a narrow, boulder-studded meadow. If he could make the open glade, there'd be enough starlight to examine the animal. A pebble might have caught in the frog of a hoof, and if he could gouge it out with his jackknife they might be able to go on.

With the stumbling mule following, Johnny made the meadow, and swung down

from his saddle. Turning in the dim light, he saw instantly what had happened. Benson's shipshape pack had shifted beneath its tie-ropes. It was canted half off its wooden saddle.

"Lord!" Johnny muttered, and his stocky legs carried him to the mule, "if any pokes have spilled— Cuss that Benson anway!"

His hands shook a little as he touched the pack. If any pokes were missing, travelers riding this road the next morning would find and keep them, and his percentage would dwindle. Shoulder beneath the canted pack, he heaved. The pack shifted to the opposite side of the saddle with surprising ease. Johnny Cotton straightened slowly, and for minutes that seemed to stretch into hours he stared at the canvas load. Then, grimly, his hand brought a big clasp-knife from his pocket.

Gold was heavy. A hundred thousand dollars' worth of it weighed plenty. "Which makes me a hell of a lot huskier than I figure, *or there ain't gold inside that pack!*"

That was proved a moment later. One swift slash with his knife opened a gap large enough for him to pull a leathern poke from inside the pack. Spreading the drawstrings, Johnny Cotton poured white river sand into the palm of his hand.

Staring at the sand, he failed to hear the warning that came from behind him. That tycoon trio in Grizzy Bear had tricked him into riding this way with a load of sand instead of gold, and there could be only one reason. They wanted all of the hundred thousand for themselves! More than likely, agents of Dandy Jim Benson and Ike Walters were spreading the surreptitious word around town right now that the gold had been taken out by Johnny Cotton. And if he returned with the pack and accused them of their trickery, they'd claim he'd substituted the sand himself, and cached the treasure the mule had been carrying.

"CAIN'T you hear?" Johnny was aware of the voice behind him for the first time. "I said turn around, mister, and keep your hands away from that cutter on your hip! I'm takin' you back to Grizzly Bear for hangin'. Folks are going to be right interested when I tell 'em I caught you fillin' these here pokes with sand after you cached all the gold—"

The voice was Clyde Parma's. Johnny recognized it, and he heard the chill click of a revolver coming to full cock. He was suddenly aware of the cool feel of the big clasp-knife against his right palm. It was a weapon the other hadn't seen.

"You got me, I guess," Johnny said as he turned and found the crouched shape of Parma close in front of him. The man was grinning in the starlight. The brown patch of throat below the beard was where the knife-blade caught him. Johnny heard the slitting impact of flung steel slashing through flesh and bone, and the strangled scream that ended Clyde Parma's life. The man tumbled toward him, and for a moment Johnny felt nausea twist his stomach.

Johnny lashed Parma's body atop the pack load of sand-filled pokes. All the five miles back to the American ford, he was thinking fast. Walters, Benson, and Carstairs couldn't have left the gold stored in their safes, for investigation would prove it was there. No, they'd probably removed the dust, once he was safe on his way, to some cache of their own.

With him out of the way, where would they find a better place to cache a hoard of gold, than in the cabin he'd deserted? "It's worth lookin' into!" he muttered as the black splashed across the ford.

A shadow moved in the brush that cloaked the opposite bank. Johnny snapped his Colt from leather, and then a slim figure in man's clothes stepped into the clear.

"Johnny," Marianne White's voice came softly to him. "Oh, thank God you've come back. I—I couldn't cross on foot to follow you. I've been waiting—"

The girl's upturned face was a pale blur. Johnny looked down at her, and he could feel his heart jumping. "You—" he began.

"I kept watching your cabin after you pulled out," the words tumbled from the girl's throat. "I—I couldn't trust the offer those men made you. It seemed too good to be true, but I knew you wouldn't take a woman's word for that. So I stayed awake, watching, and about two hours after you left, I saw them come back to your cabin. I recognized that white horse Dandy Jim Benson always rides. They carried something inside. After they left, I went to look—and the inside of your stove is packed with gold!"

Johnny laughed, and the harshness of his voice was something he hardly recognized.

"I had a hunch riding back upstream that it might be there, but what you say settles my mind. Slip up here behind my saddle. We've got one more little chore to do, then we'll go get that *oro* and bring it back to the men who dug it!"

Riding cautiously through the darkness, Johnny reached the edge of town and drew the pack mule with its grisly burden up beside his saddle horse. He cut it across the rump with the end of the lead-rope and released his grip.

He heard the girl gasp behind his back. "Johnny, what—"

"The idea is to have company when we come back," he told her as he swung the black into the trail leading up Grizzly Creek. "That pack mule and its load is going to have every man-jack in town follerin' it to Dandy Jim Benson's Gold Star."

HE COULD hear the rumble of men's voices inside the Gold Star as he drew up behind the saloon. The sound came through the open rear door opening into a hall that led to the big main room, and Johnny decided there was just one way to get that gold pack into the saloon. Ducking low, he sent the black through the open doorway and down the corridor.

Men were turning at the sound of shod hoofs on wooden flooring. Johnny saw startled, bearded faces swing up.

They'd brought Clyde Parma's body in and laid him on a card table, and they'd flanked his body with the pokes of sand. Ike Walters and stocky Sid Carstairs were standing alongside the table. Dandy Jim Benson had his back to the bar.

"I'm telling you, men," he was saying with a force that was hard to halt, "that shirt-tail miner we picked to deliver your gold to Hangtown exchanged pokes somewhere along the trail, and Clyde must have spotted him doing it. We've got to get the whelp—"

"The whelps!" Johnny corrected as he rode into the room. "Three hombres who filled my stove full of your gold, men, after they sent me to deliver a load of sand!"

"Cotton!" Benson's right hand was flipping toward his opposite wrist in the telltale draw of the sleeve-gun artist. Ike Walters stared, breaking off his tirade, and followed suit.

But it was the lumberman who drew his Colt fastest, and it was his gun that Johnny answered first. He had to down three men in split seconds or die, and yet oddly he seemed to have time to level his weapon with care. The man who made his bullets count, a scout on the plains had told him, was the man who lived the longest. That memory came back to him as he squeezed trigger and saw lead shock Carstairs backward into the path of Walters' gun. The merchant's first slug blew his own companion into a forward dive. Johnny fired deliberately across the man's falling body, and he felt the smash of derringer lead through his leg as Benson cleared his sleeve-gun.

Walters was twisting backward, gun slipping from bullet-shattered fingers, as Johnny twisted in the black's saddle. Agony was running through him as he targeted the white front of the saloonman's shirt, and squeezed trigger again. Benson jerked upright. A slow stain started to widen across the cloth as his hand rose jerkily to his chest.

"You—you—" he got out, and then he was pitching forward toward the sawdust-covered floor.

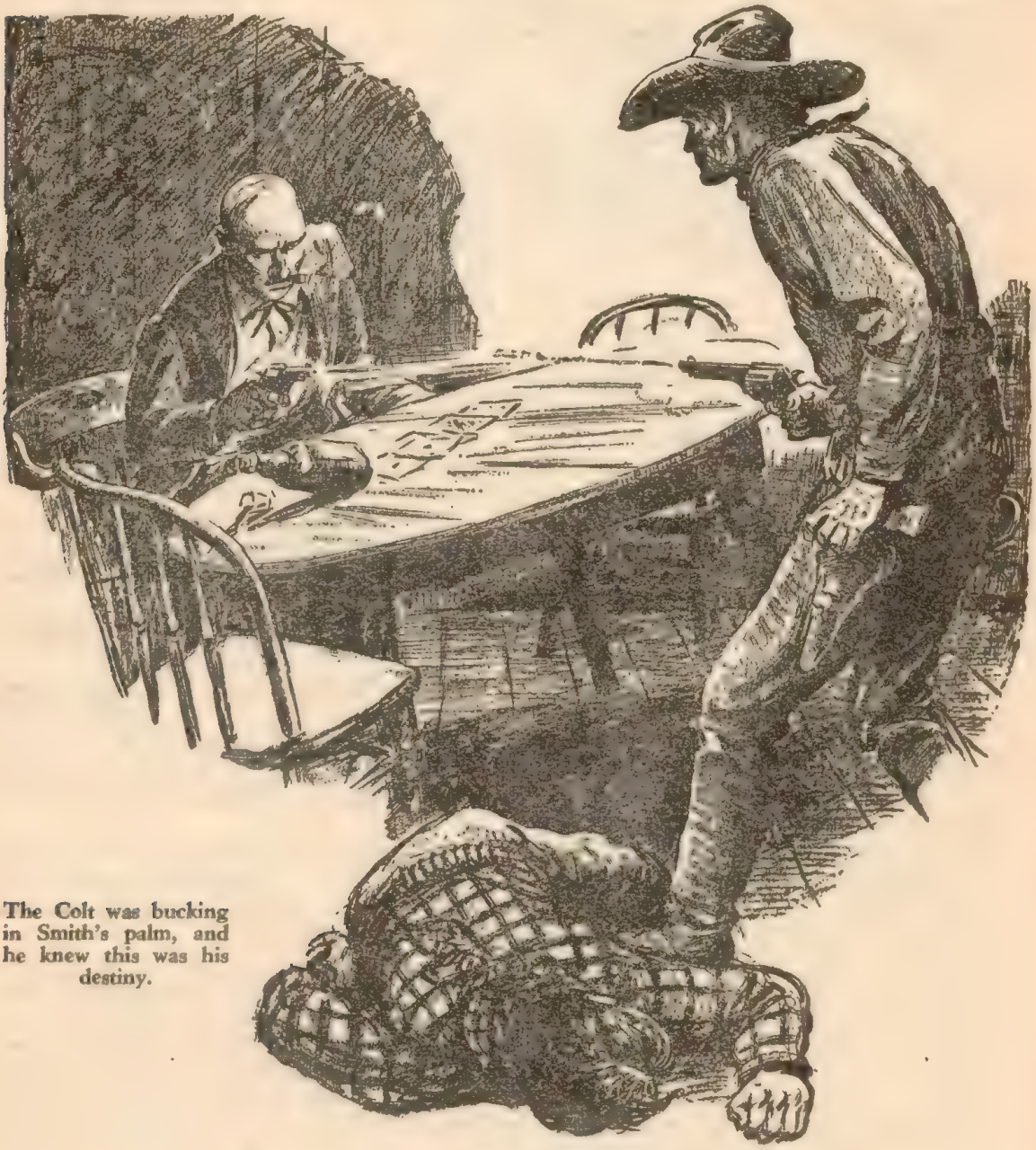
"No ye don't!" There was another battle going on at the corner of the bar, where a burly Irish miner was wresting a sawed-off shotgun from the hands of the barkeep. "There's been enough blood let around here for one night, begorra, and the boy has done a good job of lettin' it. Twenty thousand of that gold in the pack settin' at the back of his saddle is mine, and I'd kissed it goodbye after we saw that load of sand. So, personally, I'm in favor o' sharing some of it with the lad who brought it back. How say the rest of you? Do I hear an 'aye'?"

A roar that seemed to shake the roof hit Johnny's pain-dazed ears.

"Hell, we'll do more than that for Johnny Cotton," another prospector roared. "His claim would pay money, was it to have a sluice-box and men to operate it. I'm for claimin' a donation of lumber from Carstairs' yard and buildin' him one!"

Johnny felt a swelling in his throat, and it wasn't from the pain in his leg. A man couldn't answer this kind of friendship with words. He knew he'd found his home at last.

RENDEZVOUS IN FORTY GUN



The Colt was bucking in Smith's palm, and he knew this was his destiny.

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

The man called Slim Smith had a job to do in Forty Gun, and he aimed to do it—until he found his grim errand would bring hell-on-earth to the only two people in the whole world whom he could call friends.

HE CAME to with the sun beating down on his face, and a feeling of distorted unreality in him. For a time he lay still, conscious only of the sun, a throbbing headache, and the disquieting fact that he didn't know who he was, where he was, nor what had happened to him. He had a vague memory of being in a stagecoach that was whipping around a

sharp twist in the road, of a big wagon standing motionless, of being thrown through space, of a jarring, head-cracking blow. Beyond that he could not think.

This his vision cleared. He was aware that he was lying in a buckboard, that a pretty, blue-eyed girl was smiling at him from the seat. He wouldn't have been surprised if he'd heard an angel twanging on a golden harp, but his headache persuaded him that this wasn't heaven.

"I thought you'd be coming around," the girl said pleasantly. "I'm Nina Harridge. My brother Hank pulled you up to the road. He went down to the bottom of the canyon to see if anybody else was alive."

"Your brother pulled me up here?" the man asked dazedly.

The girl nodded. "You must have been thrown clear of the stage when it went over. Anyhow, you landed on a ledge, and stayed there. Hank went down, got a rope around you, and pulled you up." She frowned. "I can't see why the stage would go off here. Miles Tenner has been driving Dead Horse Hill for years."

The man remembered the big wagon again, but he didn't mention it. He rubbed a hand over his face, and stared at the dust and dried blood upon it. He groaned, "I guess I must o' got knocked loco. Can't seem to remember anything."

"We'll get a doc out from Forty Gun to look at you." Nina Harridge's eyes had narrowed. "You'd better be thinking, mister. When Hank gets back he's going to ask what kind of gent he fished up from that ledge. If you can't tell him, he's going to have his suspicions."

"Why should he be suspicious?" the man asked.

"It just doesn't make sense, mister," the girl said flatly. "Like I said, there was no reason for the stage to go off here. Besides, you're no drummer who'd be riding the stage to sell a bill of goods to Bill Ansley in Forty Gun. You're dressed like a cowhand, and you wear that pair of sixes on your hips like you knew how to use them."

Wearily the man closed his eyes. "I ain't lying, ma'am. I don't know who I am."

"Likely you came from Prineville. Maybe you've heard of Dead Horse Hill, or Forty Gun? Or maybe you've heard of Pidgin Ruark and Tim Dale?"

"I don't remember them names."

It was then that Hank Harridge came up to the buckboard. He said harshly, "Miles Tenner is dead. There wasn't nobody else in the stage."

He was young, this Hank Harridge—not much older than the girl. Like her, he had blue eyes, but there the resemblance ended. Nina was a tiny girl, slender and shapely. Hank was big across the shoulders, and tall. Nina had a pert, turned-up nose and a full-lipped mouth. Hank's nose was sharp, and his chin was the square, blocky chin of a fighting man.

For a long moment Hank Harridge had stood in the road, his eyes on the man in the buckboard. Then Nina said, "This hombre can't remember anything about who he is, Hank, but he sure isn't a thirty-a-month cowhand."

"That he ain't," Harridge said somberly. He stepped up into the seat. "Reckon we'd better take him into Forty Gun for the Doc to look at."

"No," Nina said quickly. "Take him home."

"I don't want to be no bother," the man murmured.

"We're taking you home," Nina repeated firmly. "You can go for Doc then, Hank. You ought to tell the sheriff about the stage."

"I reckon," Hank agreed. No use arguing with Nina, stranger. She says you're going to the Tipped Triangle, so that's where you're going."

THE man said nothing more as the buckboard wheeled down the grade. Again his mind was doggedly trying to tear away the veil that hid his past. He had a feeling that he'd been bound for Forty Gun to do a job—a big job, an important one. The girl had asked him if he'd ever heard of Pidgin Ruark or Tim Dale. He knew now he'd heard of those names. Somehow they seemed bound up with the job he'd come to do. Here it was, he thought, the parts of the puzzle-pattern, but they would not fall into place.

The buckboard rolled down the last slope of Dead Horse Hill, leveled off on the narrow valley that followed the creek for a mile, and turned across the stream into the Tipped Triangle yard. Hank Harridge said, "I'll help you git this hombre into bed, Nina, and then—"

"Elevate, Harridge!"

Harridge lifted his hands. The man in the buckboard saw the tightness that had come to the corners of his mouth, the narrowing of his eyes. Harridge said, "I didn't think you'd have the guts to come here, Garrity. What do you want?"

"You know well enough," Garrity laughed. "Pidgin's played easy with you up to now, account of he likes your sis. I figger mebbe she gave him the come-on, but—"

"Keep your tongue off her," Harridge began, and half-rose.

"Don't lose your head," Nina said sharply, and pulled Hank back. "That's what he wants."

Again Garrity laughed. "Yeah, I'd just as soon you made a pass for your gun, Harridge. Now that your sis has told Pidgin off, he's done playing. You'll take five thousand for the Tipped Triangle, and vamoose, both of you, or else."

"Or else what?" Harridge demanded.

"Why, you'll sign the papers I got here in my pocket, or I'll have to get rough. Now git down—"

The man in the buckboard had slipped a gun from leather, and eared back the hammer. It was a familiar motion to him. He raised himself on one elbow, and poked the gun-barrel over the side of the buckboard. "I don't reckon Hank wants to get down," he said. "Not yet. Now you can drop your iron, or start squeezing trigger."

Garrity's eyes were on the man in the buckboard, but he didn't drop the gun. He stood motionless in the doorway of the barn, ice-green eyes expressionless as he weighed his chances. A killer, the man in the buckboard saw, and wondered how he knew.

"Who is this hombre?" Garrity demanded.

"Him?" Harridge chuckled softly. "Why, he's Slim Smith. Ain't you seen him before?"

"No," Garrity snapped, still holding his eyes on the man in the buckboard. "I can get Harridge, friend. You know that, don't you?"

"Mebbe it'd be a good deal," the man said. "Your life for his. Might be a real good deal for this Pidgin hombre you've been talking about. Was I you, I'd call it a damned poor one."

Slowly the gunman nodded. He let the gun go, and said, "I'll be riding, Harridge."

"You ain't riding yet," the man in the buckboard said. "Not till Hank says so."

"Take him into town," Nina said. "Turn him over to the sheriff, Hank. He'll have to believe you this time!"

Harridge shook his head. "He won't believe nothing about Pidgin Ruark, till Pidgin's dead or busted."

Garrity snickered. "That's right, ma'am. Plumb right."

"Git out of here," Harridge said thickly. "Where's your bronc?"

"Inside."

"I'll help you get started," Harridge said, drawing his gun as he stepped down. Presently they came out of the barn, Garrity leading his horse. For a moment he eyed Harridge, rage bringing a nervous twitching to the corners of his mouth. His gaze swept Nina, and then the man in the buckboard. Sullenly he mounted, wheeled his horse, and quit the ranchyard in a cloud of dust.

HARRIDGE slipped his gun back into leather, and came up to the buckboard. "Thanks, feller," he said simply. "I've been thinking this forgetting was just a stall—figgering you came here aiming to hire your guns out to Pidgin Ruark. I reckon that ain't the way it is, or you wouldn't have sided me the way you did."

"I dunno why I came," the man said, "but my forgetting ain't no stall. And thanks for saving my life. I reckon if you hadn't pulled me up, I'd have had a tough time getting up to the rim."

The man slipped his gun back into leather. He ran a hand across his forehead. "Seems like there are things I oughtta remember. It's right there, but I can't get hold of it. Reckon I'll have to go as Slim Smith till I remember who I am."

"I studied the grade up there," Harridge said thoughtfully. "Looked like a wagon had been stopped in the middle of the road just below the bend. The stage comes around pretty fast, and the edge of the rim is rotten. Looks like murder to me. You reckon somebody was after you?"

"I don't know," the man said wearily. "Right now I'm nobody but Slim Smith. Mebbe I'm a killer. Mebbe I've done a hell of a lot of skunk tricks. I sure dunno. If you'll take me to town—"

"You're coming in," Nina said sharply.

"Help him, Hank. He looks like he might cave in any minute."

Smith swung his feet to the ground, and for a moment stood there, clutching the side of the buckboard. "Mebbe you'd better not tell the sheriff about me, Hank. I reckon there's trouble on this range, and I fit into it somewhere. I'd like to find out before the sheriff knows about me."

"I won't tell the sheriff any more than I have to," Harridge said. "He ain't crooked, but he sure listens good when Pidgin Ruark talks."

"Or Tim Dale," Nina said angrily.

"Only Tim is our friend, and Pidgin ain't," Harridge said. "The trouble with us is that we don't swing enough votes to interest old Dooley. I dunno what he's gonna do if Pidgin gits our spread. Him and Dale will be up against each other then, and hell will sure pop."

"Pidgin Ruark won't get the Tipped Triangle," Nina said firmly.

"Not if we— Hey, he's fainted again." Harridge started to grab Smith, but he was too late. Slim Smith had spilled forward on his face. Harridge picked him up and carried him into the house.

"Put him in my bed," Nina said. "Who do you suppose he is, Hank?"

"I'd sure like to know," Harridge answered after he'd laid Smith down. "It's my guess he's a gunman of some sort. Mebbe Dale decided he'd better bring in a gun-thrower to kind o' balance Ace Garrity."

"Or he may be Pidgin Ruark's man, and forgotten who sent for him," Nina said.

Harridge looked at his sister curiously. "Howcome you wanted him brought here?" he asked.

"So we can keep an eye on him," Nina answered. "I think I know Pidgin better than you do, Hank. This might be a slick scheme, Garrity waiting for us in the barn, and this man pretending to side us, just so we'd trust him."

"Ruark's slick enough," Harridge said grimly, "but he couldn't figger things that far ahead, like knowing we'd be the ones who'd pick up this jigger. I think he's Tim Dale's man, and Ruark knew he was coming, so he tried to kill him and make it look like an accident. I'll ask Tim, if I see him in town. Now you hike out, and I'll git this hombre undressed."

WHEN Slim Smith came around again he saw Nina standing in the doorway, looking at him. He said huskily, "Thanks, ma'am, for all you're doing. It worries me, thinking mebbe I'm on the other side of your trouble. What's it all about?"

"You'd better not talk now," Nina said. "Could you eat anything?"

"No," Smith answered. "I don't reckon I could. My head feels like somebody was banging on it every ten seconds with a branding iron."

Then you'd better try to sleep," Nina said, and went out.

For a time Smith didn't sleep. He was harried by the feeling that a great deal depended on him, but what it was he couldn't remember. Pidgin Ruark? Tim Dale? The sheriff, Dooley? He pressed a hand against his aching forehead and tried to think, but the answers to the nagging questions in his mind would not come.

It was dark when Smith awoke. The door was partly open, and he heard Hank Harridge come into the house.

Where's Doc Stokes?" Nina asked.

"He'll be along pretty soon," Harridge answered dully. "He's up on the bench with Mrs. Webb. He'll stop here on his way back to town."

"What's wrong, Hank?" Nina asked.

"Rush Morgan is coming to Forty Gun," Harridge answered. "Leastwise that's the talk. Nobody seems to know who sent for him. The sheriff's about loco. He says Morgan will start burning powder the minute he hits town. There ain't a worse killer in the country than him."

Neither of them spoke for a time, and the man in the bedroom knew what they were thinking. He was Rush Morgan. He'd come into this country to kill. They were afraid, Nina Harridge and her brother, that they'd brought a hired killer into their home.

"We should have let him die where he was," Nina said dully.

"You go to bed," Hank ordered. "I'll wait up for Doc."

Slim Smith didn't know how long it was before the doctor came. Harridge came into the bedroom once, and stood for a moment staring down at him. Then he went out.

Outside was the sound of a horse coming at a good clip. Smith heard Harridge move

to the door, open it. He called, "That you, Doc?"

"Sure is, Hank. I'll be right in."

A moment later Harridge came into the bedroom with a lamp, the medico behind him.

"How do you feel, mister?" the medico asked.

"Like hell," Smith answered. "I've lost my memory."

"I'll have a look." When the doctor had finished his examination, he stood up, snapping his bag shut. "You ain't got a thing wrong with you except a crack on the head, feller. A man's brain is a mighty touchy thing. I don't claim to know nothing about it. You sit tight for a few days. You'll have a headache for a long time, I reckon. Mebbe some day you'll wake up knowing who you are, or mebbe you'll get another rap on the noggin. In that case you'll be dead, or it'll all come back." The medico spread his hands wearily. "The Lord'll take care of you, mebbe. I can't."

The doctor went out, Harridge following him with the lamp in his hand. They stood for a time, talking, their voices too low for Smith to hear much of what they said. Then Harridge said, anger raising his tone, "It ain't right, Doc. You know what Pidgin Ruark aims to do."

"I know," the medico agree. "You'll fight for what you've got, Hank. I know you and I know Nina. I've got a feeling that mebbe this thing will kind o' work itself out. I've seen men like Ruark come and go. They always do, sooner or later. Don't forget that. So do men like Tim Dale."

"Tim?" Harridge demanded. "What're you saying, Doc? Tim Dale is a white man. He's a friend of ours."

Smith heard the front door open. "There' one more thing you got to remember, Hank. This fight is between Tim and Ruark. When one of 'em gets a chance to give the other one a good wallop, there ain't no such thing as being a friend. Your Tipped Triangle is between 'em. When this thing ravels out, you may find out that Ruark is more of a white man than Dale. So long, Hank."

The front door shut. Later Smith heard the doctor's horse clatter across the bridge. For a long time Hank Harridge stood without moving. Then he blew out the lamp and Smith heard the couch creak as he lay down.

SLIM SMITH stayed on the Tipped Triangle for a week. They never said anything to him about Rush Morgan, nor did he tell them that he had been awake when Hank had come back from Forty Gun, and had overheard them. Neither did they talk about the trouble between Pidgin Ruark and Tim Dale. Smith's strength came back to him rapidly, and after the first day he rode with Hank. Usually, when they rode any distance from the house, Nina went with them, too. That might be because Hank was afraid for her to stay at home, Smith thought, or it might be because Nina was afraid that he'd shoot Hank when he had the chance.

It wasn't a pleasant week for Slim Smith. The thing that bothered him the most was the watchfulness that was always a part of them when he was with them. He didn't know what kind of people he had met up with along his backtrail, but he had a feeling he had never run into finer folks than Nina and Hank Harridge.

He had another feeling, in the evenings when he sat smoking in the kitchen, his eyes on Nina's trim figure as she got supper, or in the daytime when he rode alongside of her, that if things were different, this was the woman he wanted to marry. Then he'd curse himself for a fool. What woman would think of marrying a man who didn't

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know his name, or what lay behind him? A man she suspected of being a notorious killer, come here to smoke his guns beside Pidgin Ruark?

Every day the conviction grew in Slim Smith that the answers to the questions about himself could only be found in Forty Gun. He didn't say anything about it to Nina or Hank. They wouldn't understand, and he couldn't tell them. He simply rode away from them one afternoon, after telling Hank he'd seen a stray in a brush-choked draw below them.

Smith got into Forty Gun a little after noon. He left his Tipped Triangle mount in the stable, and stood for a time in front of Ansley's store. Forty Gun looked exactly like any of a hundred cowtowns he'd known, but he couldn't tell their names, nor when he'd been in them. Still, the pattern of the town was familiar enough. There was the one short block with the false-fronted buildings facing the rutted street; the bank, Ansley's store, the hotel with its dining room, the Bull's Head Saloon, and the rest of the buildings.

There had been men along the street when Smith had first ridden into town, knots of them talking idly, and a few women going into the store or leaving it with packages in their arms. Now suddenly he saw the street was deserted.

HE WAS still standing there when a man came out of the Bull's Head and moved directly along the boardwalk toward him. Smith didn't see him come out of the saloon, but he heard a board crack under the man's weight. He spun toward him, hands blurring downward, and then stopped his motion with the guns half out of leather, for the man halted suddenly, his face a greenish gray, his hands held completely motionless at his side.

"I'm working for Dale, too, you fool," the man said, fear bringing a tremor to his voice.

"Sorry," Smith said, and let his guns drop back into leather. The motions of his hands had been instinctive, and he wondered a little at himself.

"Dale's in the back room of the Bull's Head," the man went on. "He wants to see you. He's been waiting here in town for three days, and he's getting proddy." When Smith had fallen into step beside him, the man asked. "You ain't told nobody why you're here, have you?"

"No," Smith answered grimly.

"Good," the man said. "Folks think I'm working for Pidgin Ruark. Nobody but the barkeep knows Tim's in the back room. Tim wants folks to think you're working for Pidgin."

Smith nodded, and said nothing. He followed the man through the bat-wings and on to the back room. The man stepped aside, motioning for Smith to go ahead. Smith obeyed, hands brushing gun-butts, and stepped aside so that the wall was to his back. A small man sat at a table playing solitaire, a half-chewed cigar tucked into a corner of his mouth. For a moment he pretended not to see Smith while he played two cards from his hand. Smith could see little more than the top of his bald, speckled head. He said sharply, "I don't like for a man to keep me waiting."

Tim Dale laid his cards down then, and lifted his head. He was a man about fifty, Smith guessed, with a pair of ebony eyes under dark brows that raised quizzically now. He said softly, "I don't like it, either, Morgan. I've been hanging out in this damned room for three days waiting for you to show. I'm paying a thousand dollars for this job, and a man paying that kind of dinero shouldn't have to wait."

"Sorry," Smith murmured.

"Elgin," Dale nodded at the man who stood by the door, "tells me Pidgin and Garrity are coming into town this afternoon. I want you out of here before they show up. He also says you're riding a Tipped Triangle horse."

"I been staying with Harridge," Smith said.

"How does that happen?" Dale demanded.

Smith hesitated. Then he said, "I was on that stage that went over on Dead Horse Hill. I was purty well bunged up. Hank and Nina have been taking care of me."

Dale grinned. "Then that'll make it easy. You ride back out there, stay with 'em until you get the right chance, and plug Hank. Come back here, and the barkeep will hide you till he gets the word to me. I'll show up with your dinero."

Dale's cold words drove the breath out of Smith. He'd thought the job was to kill Pidgin Ruark or Ace Garrity. He said

softly, "Hank thinks you're a good friend of his."

"Yeah, I know." Dale grinned again. "That makes it plumb easy. Nobody'll figger I had any kind of a hand in beefing him."

"I thought the scrap was with Ruark," Smith said.

"Sure," Dale nodded. "I'm gonna starve him out, and laugh while he's starving. Hank Harridge won't sell, if you've been out there a week you know that. But if Hank kicks the bucket, Nina will be reasonable. As a friend of the family, I'll see that she's taken care of. Then I dam up Dead Horse Creek, drill a tunnel through the side of the cliff, and bring the water onto my range. Pidgin won't have nothing but a pile of sand."

"Sounds all right," Smith said lazily. "There's just one thing I'd like to know. Seems like somebody ran the stage over the rim to git me. Who knew I was coming, besides you?"

"Nobody," Dale said, "but Elgin. Maybe Pidgin had a spy at Frinesville where you got on the stage, and he got word on ahead so Pidgin could fix up the trap. Only—" His black eyes whipped to Elgin. "I didn't tell nobody—and that makes you the double-crossing son who told Pidgin that Morgan was coming!"

"He's double-crossing Ruark, ain't he?" Smith asked softly.

ELGIN had backed against the door, a wild fear showing in his face. "Now, look, Tim. I didn't—"

"Shut up," Dale snarled. He ripped the cigar from his mouth, and threw it across the room. "I've been paying you big dinero for a long time, and chances are you've been double-crossing me all the time."

Elgin reached for his gun—and died with it half-raised, a bullet in his belly. He spilled forward and lay still, his body in front of the door. Tim Dale ejected the empty shell, and thumbed a new load into the cylinder. He raised his eyes to Smith as he said, "That hurts. I sure trusted that hombre."

"You're getting hurt some more," Smith said mildly. "I ain't Rush Morgan. I don't know who I am, but I sure know I ain't the kind o' huckleberry who'd take dinero to beef a gent like Hank Harridge. I reckon you'll have to beef me, too, Dale. I know too much to live long if you figger like you did about him." He jerked a thumb at Elgin's body.

Tim Dale's hand swept for his gun.

Smith's Colt lifted no higher than his hip as he dropped hammer twice. Dale's finger squeezed trigger convulsively, slapping a wild slug into the wall three feet above Smith's head. Then the gun dribbled from Dale's fingers. He lurched and fell.

Smith reloaded, surprised at the speed of his draw and the accuracy of his shoot-

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ing. No, he wasn't Rush Morgan, but whoever he was, gunwork had been his job.

"Smith." It was Hank Harridge outside, shoving open the door. "Smith, you all right? Ruark and Garrity are right behind me. They—" Then Hank saw Tim Dale's body. His eyes lifted to Smith. "You—you shot him? Then we've been right along the time. You're Rush Morgan! You're taking pay from Ruark—" Blind fury swept him as he grabbed for his gun.

"Stop it, Hank," Smith yelled. He gripped Hank's hand, and held it. "Get some sense into your head. Dale thought I was Morgan. He was gonna pay me a thousand dollars to beef you."

"You're lying," Harridge screamed.

"It's both of 'em," Ace Garrity yelled from the saloon. "Harridge and Smith!"

Smith pushed Harridge away from him and jerked his gun. Garrity was throwing down just as Smith's gun came up. A big, rawboned man was beside him, his hand swinging down for the Colt on his hip. That would be Pidgin Ruark, Smith thought.

Then Smith's gun was taking its toll. Ace Garrity had fired and missed, and Ruark was thumbing back the hammer of his gun. Garrity lurched with the impact of the heavy slug from Smith's Colt, but he didn't go down. Again he fired, almost simultaneously with Smith, but Smith's second bullet drove into his chest and blasted life from him. Pidgin Ruark had that second to aim and fire. Before Smith could swing his gun to him, Ruark's Colt blazed, and it seemed to Slim Smith that the top of his head was blown off.

AGAIN Smith's head was throbbing fiercely when he came to in a lamplighted hotel room. For a moment he thought he was in the Harridge buckboard on Dead Horse Hill. Then the happenings of the past week crowded back into his aching head. With it was a flood of memories. He knew who he was, why he had come to Forty Gun.

"He's come around," the medico said. "You talk, sheriff. I've got a hunch he's remembering things."

"I'm Sheriff Dooley," the star-toter rumbled. "I'm guessing you're Al Cripps, who works out of the governor's office. I sent for you 'cause I saw this was sure gonna be over my head when she busted. You was supposed to bring nothing that would identify you. I figgered Dale was as bad as Ruark, and anybody who had anything either one wanted was gonna git hurt."

The man who had been known as Slim Smith grinned wryly as he felt of his bandaged forehead. "Yeah, I'm Al Cripps. I reckon Pidgin Ruark's slug put some sense back into me."

"I'm thanking you for what you did," Hank Harridge said huskily. "Dang it, Slim, I mean Al—I'm sure sorry about trying to pull a gun on you in that back room. Just didn't seem possible that Tim Dale could be the kind of polecat he was. We got the yarn outa the barkeep. He was taking care of Tim while he was hiding out, waiting for Rush Morgan to show up."

"What happened to Ruark?"

"I got him, Slim," Harridge said. "I mean Al. Doggone it!"

"There's one thing I can't figger out," the sheriff rumbled. "Tim sent for Rush Morgan. It's mighty funny that coyote didn't show up."

"I kind o' recollect," Al Cripps said, "that I had a little trouble in The Dalles a few days ago with a gent named Morgan. I never thought about him being headed for the same place I was—but I reckon he's gonna stay in The Dalles for a long time."

"We'd better mosey," Doc Stokes said. "This boy's got a head of solid bone, or he'd be dead, but even bone can wear out."

Al Cripps' hand went out and gripped Nina Harridge's. "Wait, Nina," he said. "I'll do my sleeping better if I know one thing." When the others had gone he said, "I'm kind o' jumbled up in my thinking. Seems like you was scared of me, thinking I was Rush Morgan, and hating me all the time. I know it's gonna take some time to get used to the idea of seeing me as a lawman instead of a gunslick, but I sure wish you'd work on it."

It was a tender smile she gave him as she said, "It'll take some time to get used to calling you Al Cripps, Slim, but I think I can if I get a little help—like having you on the Tipped Triangle for a while when you're getting well."

"I'd like that," Al Cripps whispered. "I'm sure gonna be a long time getting well."

Three Brothers of Boothill

By THOMAS THOMPSON

CHUCK PARKISON stood up. There was a lot of man crowded into his six feet of saddle-hardened leanness. He wasn't smiling when he spoke.

"We've had squabbles before, Clay—you and Johnny and me," the young rancher said. "I guess all brothers do. But we're men now. Dad always told us to let no man call us a coward, a liar, or a thief. Clay, you're calling me a thief."

Clay Parkison looked at the fire a long time before he answered his younger brother. When he did, his voice was soft. "I only know what I see," he said, "and

The outlaws went for guns, but it was Johnny who rode in.

It takes a lot to make two brothers who've been as close as Clay and Chuck Parkison settle an argument in gunsmoke. But that steer of Clay's, with Chuck's brand freshly run on it, seemed just enough to turn the trick—and bring a rich range to quick destruction.

what I see, I don't like. I see my Bar T herd dwindling, and I see your Currycomb brand growing. It ain't hard to change a Bar T to a Currycomb."

Chuck tossed his cigarette into the fireplace. There was no use making any more talk. The Parkisons never had been ones to talk. Things had changed since Dad's death, that was all. Clay, the oldest, had drawn more and more into his shell, here on the home place. Johnny, the youngest, free from home ties, had given full rein to the wild streak that had always hovered near the surface. Chuck felt that he was sort of squeezed in between, with no place to go. He couldn't help asking about Johnny.

"What about the kid?" Chuck said. "Will he be taking sides in this?"

Clay Parkison didn't meet his brother's eyes. "Appears to me as long as Johnny hangs around with Skip Corbin, he's more your breed," Clay said. "Johnny knows he ain't welcome on the Bar T."

"I told you I don't cater to land-grabbers and cattle-rustlers either," Chuck said. "Johnny's big enough to kill his own snakes."

"Looks like three lone hands, then, don't it?" Clay said.

"Looks like," Chuck said. He took his gunbelt from the back of the chair and buckled it on. "I'll be wearing this," he said. "Any cattle I got with a Currycomb brand on them belong to me. I hope they don't wander too close to the Bar T."

Clay said only, "Keep your night riders home, Chuck."

CHUCK walked out into the star-heavy night and went to the corral. He caught up his horse and saddled him. Everything about the corral—the very smell of the dust—stirred memories. There in the big barn he and Clay and Johnny had played and practically grown up. He remembered the time they found the old dominecker's nest with thirteen eggs. That had been a battle too. . . . Things were different then.

Clay had always been the solid citizen of the three. He had been the one Dad had turned to in these last years. It was right that Clay should have the old home place. But Johnny—Johnny was different. Johnny was always on the go. He was all right as long as he had plenty to do. He was the best bronc-peeler, the best roper— Johnny always had to be the best of everything. Right now he was concerned with being the best poker-player.

He rode up the slope now and turned to take a last look at the ranch, spraddled comfortably on the floor of the valley. The moon came up and in the distance he could see the new buildings of his own Currycomb. He shifted the gun on his hip and rode over the hogback, leaving the Bar T in moon-flooded silence.

Chuck let the sorrel take its own time. When he came to the edge of the canyon where the trail was steep, he shoved his feet deep in the stirrups, laid back against the cantle and gave the sorrel its head. He stared straight into the mottled shadows and let his thoughts wander. He had never thought that a man with two brothers could feel so alone.

The sudden stopping of the horse jogged Chuck back to his surroundings. They were at the bottom of the canyon, where a broad flat pocked with live oaks and rimmed with sycamore sprouted belly-deep grass along the course of the spring-fed runoff. The unmistakable smell of wood-smoke was in the air. The sorrel nickered. Chuck spoke softly and reined the animal behind a clump of newly-flowered elderberry.

A full-grown steer broke out of a thicket at the head of the little valley and ran dodging through the scrub oak. The animal passed close to Chuck, its eyes rolling. On the steer's right flank a hot iron had added a line above the familiar Bar T brand, making a neat Currycomb. Chuck stared at it as it vanished into the brush. Then a horseman thundered up the trail and over the low ridge across the valley. Chuck sank spurs, and the sorrel plunged through the brittle elderberry and after the fleeing night rider.

The rustler's horse was fast, but Chuck could spot him loping down the long green slope of the Bar T's north pasture. Near the spot where Coyote Spring bubbled from the raw rock, the rustler turned and headed into the canyon. When Chuck reached the mouth of the boulder-strewn arroyo the rider was gone. Chuck slid his gun free in its holster and followed the cliff-darkened trail.

After a while he thought he could smell smoke, and once he heard voices. The voices seemed to come out of the very rocks

around him. He went on for a way, then he left the horse and continued on foot. The trail narrowed and became stifled between the towering boulders. The rocks formed an enclosure, and in the moonlight-spotted top of the circle, one rock stood out. The sides were tiered into a huge stairway and the rock flattened on top to a level miniature mesa.

Chuck climbed the boulder. Once on top, the nearness of the rustler hideout startled him. Directly below him a fire was blazing in a red clay clearing rimmed by the huge boulders. A circle of men sat around the blaze, leaning back against the sentinel rocks.

Skip Corbin was the only man Chuck recognized. Corbin's big frame blotted the glow of the fire, and he was doing all the talking. Chuck flattened himself on the top of the rock so he could look down into the camp. The fire threw changing shadows across the ten hard faces and gave a carved cruelness to Skip Corbin's smooth-shaven features. Corbin's voice drifted up, each word crisp and clear.

"Sure the steer was headed right?" Corbin asked.

"Right toward the Bar T," a stocky rider answered. "He was walleyed scared. He won't stop until he gets in Clay Parkison's front yard."

"That's good," Corbin said. "Those Parkison boys are salty gents. Clay gets one look at that fresh-burned steer, and the Bar T or the Currycomb, one, is going to sell awful cheap!"

"What about young Johnny?" a lanky individual asked. "Think he'll bust his cinch when he finds out what's up?"

"Don't worry about Johnny," Skip Corbin said. "Johnny's got a good start. Got a lot of gun-savvy, that kid. I don't want to lose him. You let me handle Johnny. He wins a few more big pots. . . . I pay him well for this little job he's on tonight. . . . Johnny will be thinking more and more our way all the time."

CORBIN was interrupted by the sound of a horse coming up the rock-floored trail. The sound echoed strangely in this walled enclosure. Chuck suddenly realized that if he had ridden his horse onto that rocky trail he would not be here to listen to this conversation now.

It was Johnny Parkison who rode into the gun-studded hideout. The kid was riding his chestnut gelding. He sat jauntily in a black saddle, and the gelding haughtily tossed a silver-mounted martingale. The huge taps on the stirrups touched the rock as the kid rode by. Johnny's gray hat was pushed back on his dark curly hair, and he was humming a tune.

The men greeted Johnny warmly. "Hi, kid," Skip Corbin said. "We beat you back. How'd you make out?"

"That Blake feller is the most stubborn man I ever met," Johnny said. The name ran through Chuck's mind. Blake— That must be the sodbuster down on South Fork.

"Did he get tough?" Skip Corbin asked.

"At first," Johnny said, "but I calmed him down. He didn't realize what fencing off his section would do. You don't need to worry. There'll be plenty water for the cattle."

"You shoulda smoked him out," Skip said, plainly disappointed. "I wanted him out."

"You said you wanted the water," Johnny said, his voice cold. "That's what you got. I don't mind hogging land, but I'm not killing nesters." There was a strained silence.

Then, "Forget it," Skip Corbin said cheerfully. "Let's get back to town and get the dust outa our throats. Maybe we can scrape up a game, eh, Johnny?"

"Now you're talking sense," said Johnny Parkison.

The men kicked the small fire apart and mounted. They rode down the canyon, Johnny Parkison and Skip Corbin in the lead. Chuck watched them ride. His eyes followed Johnny's erect form and he shook his head.

"I hate to do it, Johnny," he said, "but you're in a rattler's nest—and I aim to stomp that nest."

Chuck climbed down from the rock and got his horse from the thicket where he was grazing. He mounted slowly, as if he were tired, and rode slowly back to his own Currycomb.

At the ranch he turned the horse into the corral and went to the new house that he had built. He went to bed in the dark and for hours lay there tossing. In the morning he would ride to town. In the morning he'd settle with Skip Corbin and his land-grab-

bing crew. Even if it meant getting Johnny. Dawn came cold and gray into the room, and still Chuck Parkison did not sleep. He dressed and went outside.

THE sun was struggling with the heaviness of morning across the plain, and the ground fog shrouded the deep grass of the horse pasture. A dead chill silenced the early morning. Chuck went back in and built a fire in the kitchen stove. The blue smoke rose straight in the crisp air as the sun poked timidly over the horizon.

Chuck finished his breakfast slowly and then strapped on an extra gun. It felt odd, wearing two guns. He wasn't a fighting man. But Clay was a hard man to convince —had always been that way. Picked his trail and then stuck to it. Chuck took a deep breath and pulled his black felt low. He stepped out the door, and saw the four riders coming fast from the direction of the old Bar T. Clay was riding in front, and behind him Chuck recognized the sheriff.

Chuck waited for them in front of the house.

"One of my steers came home last night, Chuck," Clay said by way of greeting.

"You better shuck those guns and come along peaceful," the sheriff said.

Chuck ignored him. He said, "I found the rustlers, Clay."

Clay said, "So did I."

"Do you want to listen to what I have to say?" Chuck asked.

"I told you last night I'd seen enough," Clay said. "I don't want to hear anything you have to say about changing a Bar T to a Currycomb."

"You always was bullheaded, Clay," Chuck said. "Guess I'll have to handle this alone." His hand darted to his gun, and the sheriff backed away.

"Put that gun down," Clay said. "You don't want to add a killing to your record."

"Skip Corbin's man branded that steer," Chuck said evenly. "I was just on my way in to see Corbin. Get out of my way!"

"You mean somebody is obliging enough to brand stock for you?" the sheriff scoffed. He grinned at Clay. "Ain't never heard of rustlers that go around branding stock and giving 'em away. Mighty neighborly of them rustlers."

"You never was a practical man, Chuck," Clay said. "That story don't make sense."

"It would if you'd listen," Chuck said.

"You can talk all you want—in front of a jury," Clay said. "I'll see you get a square trial and I'll see that Skip Corbin has his say."

"I can't wait that long," Chuck said. "Get off that horse."

Clay got down. Once his hand strayed toward his saddle gun, then he changed his mind.

"Let's blast him," the sheriff said. "He can't get all of us."

"Leave him alone," Clay Parkison said. "I'll handle this."

Chuck swung up on Clay's horse, still keeping the gun trained on the men. Then he wheeled and rode for the rock-piled slope. Once he looked back and saw the sheriff and his men clawing for guns. He saw Clay stop them, and he smiled in appreciation.

Down by the spring he reined his horse into a thicket and waited. In a little while Clay Parkison came down the trail, riding Chuck's sorrel. Chuck rode out to meet him.

"Figgered you'd be along," Chuck said.

"I'm going with you," Clay said. "But if you're wrong about Skip Corbin, only one of us is comin' back."

"Johnny's there with Corbin," Chuck said.

"I know."

A lone rider wheeled from a knoll across the valley and headed for town, fast. Chuck watched the puffs of dust spouting from the feet of the running animal.

"Corbin will be expecting us," he said.

THE town was silent in the morning sun. Dogs stretched in the dusty street, and a few shaggy cowponies stood hip-shot at sagging rails. The sun glared from the can pile at the edge of the dry arroyo. There was a lazy blue patch over the half-doors of Skip Corbin's Palace Bar. Chuck and Clay rode to the Palace hitchrack and tied their horses, out of line with the door. They entered together.

A man came to meet them. It was Johnny. "What you two after?" Johnny said.

"Keep out of this, Johnny," Chuck said. "We want to see Corbin."

"He's not seeing anyone," Johnny Parki-

son said. "If it's about me, beat it. I drive my own team."

"We're seeing Corbin," Chuck said.

Johnny's hand flashed and came up with a gun. "I say who can see Corbin."

"He's marking Clay's cows with my brand," Chuck said. "Figures Clay and me will get to fighting and he can grab the ranches. You in on that?"

"I don't believe it," Johnny said. "Just because a man has got nerve enough to get big while your two sweat along on a shoestring is no sign he's all wrong. Sure, somebody might get stepped on now and then, but that's big business."

"You're just a kid, Johnny," Chuck said. "Corbin is stealing Clay's stock."

"You'll have to prove that," Johnny said.

"Then why don't you come along?"

Johnny said, "Maybe I will."

Johnny led the way to the office at the back of the bar. He opened the door and motioned Chuck and Clay inside. Skip Corbin rose from his desk. "What the hell you bring them two in here for?" he demanded. "I told you to keep 'em out!"

"I wanta hear what you got to say to them," Johnny Parkison said.

"I saw one of your men using a running iron last night," Chuck Parkison said coldly.

"Kid, if you don't want to lose your only relatives, get 'em out of here," Corbin said.

"I want you to tell my brother Clay here how you been stealing his stock," Chuck said evenly.

"Get 'em out of here, kid, I warn you," Corbin said. He was licking his thick lips and there was moisture on his forehead.

"I don't hear you denying it, Skip," Johnny Parkison said.

Corbin said, "Don't be crazy, kid."

"I didn't contract to rustle stock," said Johnny.

There was the sound of boots on the floor outside. Skip Corbin listened, then relaxed, and a twisted grin tugged at his mouth.

"All right, kid," he said. "If you want to play your hand that way." He slapped at his desk drawer and palmed a small gun.

It was Chuck that triggered first. Corbin slumped forward across the desk, his fingers spreading wide. Then the three brothers turned as the door flew open. Chuck recognized some of the men he had seen around the campfire the night before.

A stocky, black-bearded man triggered first, his bullet slamming into the floor as Clay shot him between the eyes and he crumpled forward. Then all three brothers were crouching in a hail of lead. Bullets whined off the floor, from Skip Corbin's polished desk, from the door-sill. Chuck saw Johnny stagger sideways, then recover and down another man.

A slug burned across Chuck's short ribs. Another stabbed into his thigh, but he braced himself against the desk and kept on firing. Clay was down—and then the continuous roar of gunfire had died away. Corbin's men were piled in a limp, bloody heap outside the door. There were six of them, Chuck saw, but they'd looked like an army.

Clay was getting up off the floor, clutching a red-stained shoulder. "You all right?" Johnny asked. Clay smiled. "Sure, kid. You?" He looked for reassurance from Johnny to Chuck, and then the three of them moved across the empty bar-room.

Outside, the sheriff stared wide-eyed at the grim-faced brothers as they mounted their horses and turned in the dusty street. Johnny curbed his prancing chestnut.

"Better get in there, Sheriff," he said, jerking a thumb toward the Palace.

THE three Parkisons, bandaged and solemn, rode out the trail toward the old home place. They didn't speak for a long time. It was Clay who broke the silence. He was the oldest of the three, and he always made the decisions.

"If we was to merge the Bar T and the Currycomb it would make a nice combine," he said.

"Yes," Chuck agreed, "it sure would. Need a whale of a good foreman, though."

Another mile of silence went by, then Clay said, "Johnny here'd make about the best foreman I know. That is, if he'd be interested."

Johnny Parkison didn't say anything at first. Then he grinned. "Why not?" he said. "Full house beats three of a kind, don't it?"

Clay and Chuck pushed their horses into a jogging trot. The chestnut gelding stepped proudly into an easy singlefoot as Johnny Parkison hummed a crazy tune.

VALLEY OF DOOMED LAWMEN

By SEYMOUR IRVING RICHIN

Steve saw his partner die, and he went wild.

The nine badges of dead lawmen that Hawk Garson sent Sheriff Steve Austin, were warning enough that Austin's was already tallied as the tenth —unless he could prove that a badge-toter who used his fists instead of sixguns, and a hospital instead of a jail, was salty enough to buck the kill-craziest lobo in all the hell-roaring gold fields!

CHAPTER ONE

Gamble With Death

NONE of them thought of the gold they were gambling for. In the amber splash of light from the kerosene lamp on the table, the faces of the three outlaws were strained. They sat

rigidly, handled their poker cards with a peculiar listlessness. For hours they had worked hard to smother what was burning in their minds, to overwhelm their suspense with a fever-pitch of gambling.

They all knew it wasn't working. They said nothing, but scanned each other with brief, searching glances.

Suddenly Luke Winant, a deep-chested gunhawk with heavy, arrogant features, flung his cards on the table. He arose and strode to the window. The scrape of the cards was the only sound in the room. Outside, wind howled, snow-laden, through the ghost-town of Red Dog.

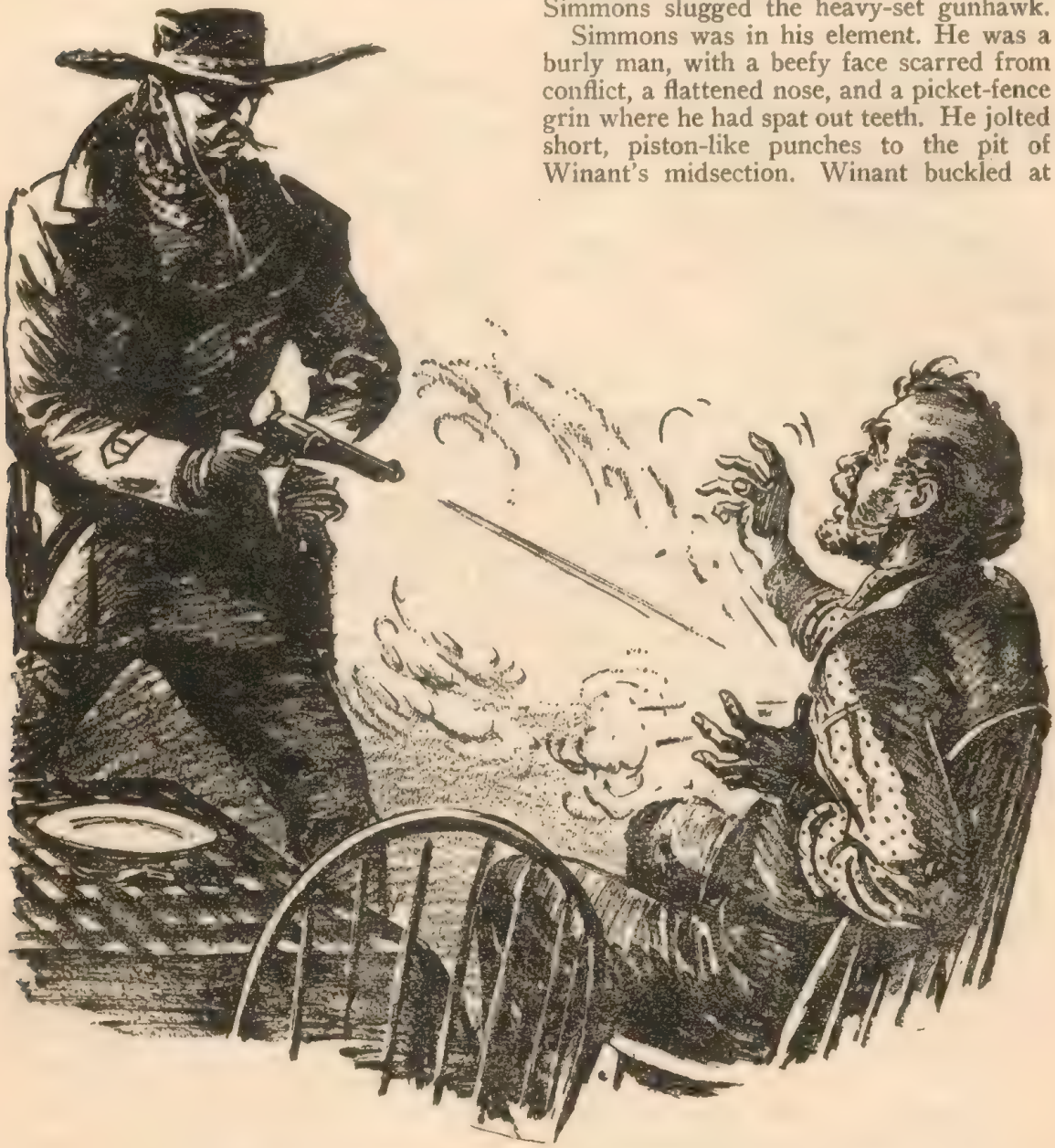
"The hell with this!" Winant was bitter. "Clark, Simmons, I don't know about you—but I'm quittin'. I'm through!"

Clark said bleakly, "Death splits this gang up, nothin' else. You swore that."

"Oath or no oath, I'm cuttin' loose."

Heavy silence answered him. Then Clark and Simmons leaped out of their chairs. They gave him no chance. A slim and darkly handsome gun-fighter, Clark fought only with steel in his hand. He covered Winant with a swiftly drawn Colt while Simmons slugged the heavy-set gunhawk.

Simmons was in his element. He was a burly man, with a beefy face scarred from conflict, a flattened nose, and a picket-fence grin where he had spat out teeth. He jolted short, piston-like punches to the pit of Winant's midsection. Winant buckled at



Novelette of a Lawdog-Hunting Killer

the knees, nausea rolling through him in choking waves. He was too smart to resist. He kept his hand away from his gun. A killer himself, he knew when not to get proddy. One move and Clark would gut-shoot him where he stood.

CLARK said, "Getting yourself killed isn't bein' smart." He added, "You're no itchier'n we are to know why the Chief called the gang together in this ghost-town. But the Chief does the leadin'. You'll keep followin' his orders, same as us, or you won't live."

"Damn you," Winant exploded when he got his breath back, "I've followed him for years, same as you, askin' no questions, come hell or high water. Because he had the savvy that got us gold by the hundred pound and never a dead man. But the Chief's gone plumb loco. He's hog-wild for lawman blood now, not loot. I'm quittin'. You better foller my lead or you'll both be stretchin' rope!"

Simmon's misshapen lips curled. There was a hollow click as he dogged back the hammer of his .45. Clark seized his wrist, plunged the gun deep into its holster. "Not yet," he said. "This hombre's got somethin' on his mind." He whirled on Winant. "Say it."

Winant said it. He pointed out, "In our last bank-bustin' raid we lost twenty thousand in gold and four dead out of eight because the Chief was loco to trade gunsmoke with the posse. Ever since his son was captured and hanged by Sheriff Austin he's been robbin' to kill lawmen, not killin' to rob. Instead of escapin' like we could have, what happened? We got shot to hell instead, and had to vamoose into Indian country one step ahead of the noose."

A sardonic gleam came into Winant's glance. "Now he calls us together for a raid, he says. But I tell you he's got other ideas. You jaspers have been buried in Indian country so long you don't know what he's been up to. Winant paused, shifted a glance from Clark's stony expression to Simmons, who eyed him murderously.

"You've said plenty. Finish your blowing," Clark said.

Winant grinned. He gave it to Clark in one dose. "The Chief's been lynchin' lawmen all this while—and mailin' their tin badges to *Austin.*"

Clark paled. "Damn you, you're just shootin' off your mouth—"

"I'm tellin' you straight. So far the Chief's mailed him nine stars and boasts that the tenth one will be Austin's. That's the real reason why we're here under Austin's gunsights. To help him get revenge, not loot!"

"Under Austin's gunsights," Clark breathed. Instinctively, he darted his gun-hand toward leather. Simmons' knuckles bulged whitely around his gun-butt. It was a deep-rooted, reflex action, as natural to them as recoiling from the edge of a precipice. There wasn't a breath of danger in the whole ghost-town—no living danger. But the threat of Sheriff Steve Austin was a fear that ghosted the trail of many a lobo, wherever a sluicebox could be found.

Under their Chief, Hawk Garson, they had made the Gold Creek fields a wilderness of looting and murder, until Steve Austin had brought his freighter business to the fields a year ago. Austin's trade had been short-lived. His wagons had been looted and destroyed. Bushwhacked by the Garson gang, he carried ambush lead in his shoulder to remember them by. The bullet had entered his body through the back.

AUSTIN hadn't been the man to raise his hands to an outlaw gun. "No pack of gunhawks can beat me into the dust and walk away in one piece," he'd said. Grimly, he'd volunteered to tote a badge where lawdogs were called walking dead men. "I'm goin' to put some teeth in your law!"

He did. Strangely, his first act had been to destroy the Gold Creek jail. Every gun-hung hombre in the fields roared at that, Hawk Garson the loudest. Austin let them laugh. He was disgruntled only when the Garson gang abandoned the fields for richer loot in Hangtown country. "Our paths will cross again," he'd asserted. "My day will come. Meanwhile, these Garson varmints are goin' to hear about me."

In place of the jail he had a special hospital erected and hung a shingle on the door—FREE TREATMENT FOR LAWBREAKERS. Then he quietly hunted down the badmen in the fields, one by one. He gave them one of two choices. They could duel him with pistols at the suicidal distance of three paces, or fight him with their bare hands.

Not a desperado was desperate enough to choose the murderous dueling ground. They chose fist-fighting, or vamoosed suddenly. The battles in Austin's Arena became famous throughout the gold country. Raw, savage battles were fought there, fought till only one man could walk away. Not a single hardcase looked the same after running into Austin's fists. They were changed men. Their faces were changed. Austin scientifically beat them into an unrecognizable pulp.

"Bust a man's face," he'd said, "and he won't look so quick for trouble."

Each hardcase Austin fought was Garson in another form, in his mind. Over and over again, in encounter after encounter, he was revenging himself against the man who had wiped out his hard-won business and shot him in the back. His savagery in the arena was awesome to see. Coupled with a constantly developing boxing skill, it was unstoppable. The outlaws who fought in Austin's Arena got free treatment in the hospital, and most of them needed plenty.

The jail was not missed. Claim-jumpers and tinhorn gunslicks who were careless with their hardware heard talk of free hospital treatment in a jail-less mining town and made tracks for other parts. All except Garson. He'd sent his most powerful battler back to Gold Creek with orders to smash Austin into his own hospital. Simmons had been accompanied by his son, Luke Garson, to see that the battle was fought. Shortly after, Simmons had returned with his face battered beyond recognition—alone. He bleakly informed his chief a miner jury had sent his son to the gallows.

"How'd it happen?" Hawk Garson had turned chalk-white.

"Luke got drunk and killed a miner in a card game. Austin captured him before he could get to his horse. The jurymen sentenced him to hang the next day." Simmons couldn't look at the Chief. "We'll get even with that lawdog," he said, vehemently.

"Yeah," Garson had sworn, "I'll get even."

Nobody in the gang had known then what he meant.

CLARK'S handsome face was ashen. A vain man, he had a horror of the slightest injury to his perfect features. He glanced at Simmons' battered face and licked his lips, showing white, square teeth. "You mean Austin is near Red Dog? On our trail?"

Winant said acidly, "You catch on quick. He's staying in Bonanza Bar, not far from here. Left Gold Creek for our trail after the Chief lynched his first peace-officer. If you want to stick with the Chief and tangle with that hellion, you can have my share, too!"

WASTE PAPER IS A WEAPON OF WAR

Twenty-five tons of blueprint paper go into the making of a battleship. Paper is needed for packing food, ammunition and medical supplies for the armed forces—and the shortage is acute. Don't burn or throw away newspapers, magazines, wrapping paper, cartons. . . .

SAVE IT . . . SORT IT . . . CALL YOUR COLLECTOR

For a moment Clark and Simmons stood uncertainly, their thoughts tightrope-walking on the precipice between thought and action. Winant remembered that these men had sworn they'd charge hell with a bucket of water if Garson ordered them to. But Sheriff Austin was hellfire of a different caliber.

"Austin in Bonanza Bar," Simmons said. He wiped his hand across his puffy lips. "I'm gettin' out of here."

Clark couldn't speak. He nodded in violent agreement.

"Now you're talkin', boys!" Winant said. In the heat of his triumph, he failed to hear the window creak open. "No loco gunhawk ever led a gang except to boothill. The Chief be damned! Follow me, and I'll lead you to territory that pays off!"

"Draw, Winant!"

Blood stung the skin of Winant's neck and chest at the sound of Hawk Garson's command. He whirled. The Chief was glaring at him through the opened window. His face was shadowy in the flaky snow, blow-

ing past the square of the window-frame. But there was nothing vague about the gun. Hawk Garson held his Colt on an unrelenting level with Winant's chest.

Recovering, Clark said quickly, "The hell with you, Winant. The Chief gives me my orders."

Simmons echoed, equally shrewd, "Yeah, you double-crossin' coyote, hell's your home town!"

Hawk Garson vaulted through the window into the room, his gun on the ready. He had a lean, wiry build with unnaturally long arms and legs. His movements were ferret-like, startled. Long years of dodging lawmen and bounty hunters had made his behavior catlike. He was capable of killing a man for snapping his fingers behind him.

Sharply angular, his face slanted from temples to chin like the blade of an axe. His nose was a hawkish beak, earning his nickname. His ears were only irregular stubs, cropped by a miner jury for thievery somewhere in the past. Anger distorted Garson's face into a grotesque mask of geniality. He grinned when he killed. He was grinning now.

Winant didn't palaver. He read the handwriting on the coffin. He lunged sideways, shielding himself behind Clark and Simmons, and his hand blurred for leather. Garson's gun bucked against his palm, a flame-jet tearing across the room. The bullet missed. Winant had been too quick. Instantly, Clark and Simmons spilled forward for distance and safety. They leaped out of the way, rolled over and over on the floor like bronco-tossed cowboys.

SIMMONS crashed into the table. It shook and skidded back. The lantern hit the floor, light careening eerily through the room. Incredibly, the glass didn't shatter. The lantern bounced on its iron brace, and rolled, throwing patches of inquiring light around the room. A ghastly calm came, briefly. Then shots tore the quiet to pieces.

The lantern slid more slowly. The light traveled past Winant across the hip. His hand was falling away from his gun, half pulled from leather. He was dying. Three spurts of flame had flashed from Garson's Colt, like links in a chain, tearing little red gashes in his shirt. Winant rocked on his heels. He tottered in an unsteady circle, on tiptoe, the crimson pools on his shirt widening, merging. His hand stretched out in supplication to the darkness.

Garson commanded, "Finish him off, boys. That's orders."

Clark and Simmons got to their feet slowly. They glanced at their chief, who was grinning malevolently over a twist of smoke curling up from his gun-muzzle. He said, "I don't talk to hear myself."

Clark and Simmons fired simultaneously at the dying man's head. The supplicating arm fell. Winant was dead before he hit the floor.

Garson's men got shovels from the livery stable and buried the dead man on the edge of the ghost-town, near a clump of manzanita. The crisp night air was blind with snow. They filled his grave with fresh earth, and the shovelfuls of earth turned white in midair. The cavorting flakes of snow cut the horizon down to a few feet. They could not see the sky. Everywhere, flurries of snow fought fierce little clashes and then, tired of battle, dashed off to play elsewhere. They labored in silence, breathing hard, watching their breath take shape in the wind. At last it was over.

Simmons wiped sweat from his forehead. "We're in a tight, and no mistake. Got to tangle with Austin—or the Chief."

Clark's handsome brown eyes glittered. "Austin," he said.

"I want no more of him either," said Simmons, licking his bruise-bloated lips. "But buckin' the Chief's draw is askin' for a fast funeral. Best we take his orders now and vamoose when we get the chance."

Clark nodded. "Yeah. Reckon that's right."

HAWK GARSON was thoughtfully smoking a cornshuck quirly when they entered the cabin. Leaning back in a chair at the table, he was balancing it on two legs, enjoying the smoke and ease after the bleak night. At the first sound of their footfalls, the chair cut down sharply against the wooden floor. Instinctively, Garson drew his gun. He relaxed when he saw them, and nodded. He said, "That coyote tell you about me and Austin?"

"Yeah. Everything," Clark admitted.

The Chief frowned. He blew smoke at the ball of light in the uprighted lantern. Thoughtfully, he watched the thread of smoke bounce off and unravel against the

glass. He said bluntly, "You're wrong. Not everything. The damned coyote didn't know about the gold mine I aim to corral."

Clark and Simmons exchanged glances. Gold mine! In that instant, every stray thought in their heads, every sharp or vague current of reflection that makes up the ceaseless pattern of the human mind, was gone from their minds. Forgotten was the man they had lowered into the earth only minutes before. Forgotten was the murder, their treachery, forgotten even their fear of Steve Austin. Some of the nameless urge that had sent half the male population of Oregon streaming into California at the cry of gold transformed them then.

Studying them, Garson knew that, come hell or high water, these men would not desert him. Whatever Winant's influence had been, they were under his thumb now.

Clark said eagerly, "Where's it at? Tell us about it, Chief."

Simmons nodded, grasping for the information. "Yeah," he said vehemently.

Garson grinned. He said, "The mine belongs half to Austin and half to Massey, a prospector down at the Bonanza Bar who was grubstaked by that snake of a lawdog."

Clark was astonished. "You mean Chuck Massey? The short placer miner with the beard who used to pan back in Gold Creek?" He shook his head in amazement when Garson nodded. "Thunder! I know him. I tried to spark his daughter, Betty, when he prospected there 'fore Austin put his brand on the law. He was just a poor, down-at-the-heels tramp with a pick on his shoulder."

"He ain't poor no longer. He tossed that pick into the richest strike ever opened up in these parts," Garson said grimly. "Nobody knows where that mine is 'ceptin' Massey. And from Massey's talk they're ain't a man could find it again, includin' himself, without a map to go by. I know Massey has that map. He camped in this ghost-town the night before he reached Bonanza Bar with the nugget samples from his strike. I was hidin' out here and I spied on him. I didn't see the gold but I saw him lookin' at a map all the time, though I didn't know what it meant then. He keeps it tied to a string of rawhide 'round his neck." Garson dropped his quirly on the floor and crushed out the red embers with his booted toe. "We got to get that."

CLARK said, his voice as empty of feeling as the steel in his holster, "So we beef him, huh, Chief?"

"We'll do more than beef *him*," Garson said with venom. "I aim for us to kill Massey, rob his map and make it look like Austin did the murder. It's sure fire! The way I figure it, the jury'll hang him for killin' his partner so's he could go whole hog on the mine."

The consuming power of Garson's hatred twisted his breath in his throat. His voice was a whisper but somehow thick with a Satanic vigor. "That snake of a lawdog is goin' to hang the same way he hanged my boy. There'll be more lawdogs after him—but Austin is special. I want that proddy lawdog swinging on his own gallows. I want him killed by the law!"

His passion spent, Garson took a deep breath and touched his hand to his cropped ear. Then he glanced up quickly. "What the hell are you two starin' at?"

Simmons was gaping, but he shook his head. "We ain't staring, Chief."

"Get movin', then," Garson directed irritably. "Hike out for your horses in the stable. We're not here to kill time. We're workin' this job tonight."

Simmons winced. "In this storm?"

"The weather is on our side. It'll cover our tracks. Go on, do what I told you."

They hiked out fast.

CHAPTER TWO

Killer Sheriff

STEVE AUSTIN stared at the nine sheriff's badges spread out in a circle on the bed in his hotel room. He had stared this way often and long. And always the contemplation made his earnest blue eyes glitter with a vindictiveness that he could not have understood before his lawman life began. He had been easy-going then. He was learning the meaning of bitterness now.

He was tall, about twenty-eight. He had the wide shoulders and sloping muscles of a boxer, and extraordinary hands. They were massive, range-bronzed and scarred with the punishment of much fist-fighting. There was a determination to them, a kind of immense, driving virility that keynoted his personality.

He lived to avenge the suffering behind

those mute stars. Mute? Somehow they were eloquent to him. Each separate star lying there was a life—a life someone must have loved. Each was a law-serving human being who had been murdered like a thief.

A knocking at the door broke in on him. Quickly, he collected the badges and dropped them into a bureau drawer.

He wasn't prepared to see Betty Massey. He had answered the door with a feeling of annoyance at the interruption. That feeling was gone at once. In some inexplicable way, he knew then that he would always remember her as she stood on the threshold waiting. He knew that some day in a lonely hour he would shuffle through the pictures in his memory and this would be the one he'd favor most.

Her raven-black hair glistened with snow. She was covered with it from head to foot. Snow changed her rough miner's attire, softened the bulky jacket and graceless blue denims with whiteness.

He smiled. "Strange to see you here, Betty. But no one was ever more welcome. Come on in."

"Dad sent me," she explained. She came in quickly and tossed her hair, spinning around and hugging herself for warmth. Her gray eyes were serious. "Do you want a copy of Dad's map?" she asked abruptly.

He shook his head, surprised. "Too risky," he said. "The less copies, the better. Extra ones might fall in the hands of the wrong hombre. We can't be too cautious."

"That's what Dad thinks. But he figured maybe you were mad because he kept the only map. And seeing as the mine's half yours, it's your privilege—"

"Mad?" He whirled on her. "Mad about what?"

Her dark eyebrows arched. "That's what we'd like to know." She was nettled. "Gold makes enough bad feeling among partners without including you and Dad. Everyone in town is talking about bad blood coming between you. Can't blame them either, what with you not visiting Dad for two weeks all of a sudden. Dad wants to have that out with you, man to man."

AUSTIN wet his lips. He had never favored confusion, and he couldn't dodge any more. "That isn't the reason," he told her. He paced from the bureau to the door and back again. "I stayed away because of you."

"Because of me?" Her hands had lifted together at her throat.

He tried to build a quirly, but the makings spilt out of his fingers onto the floor and he gave it up. He said, "You know how I feel about you. I know you do. I've seen it in your eyes, many's the time." He added somewhat inanely, "Your eyes say a lot."

She stood still, watched him, her eyes luminous. She said nothing.

"I know it sounds loco, the way I say it." Austin's lips twisted. "But women and war don't mix. I got a private war on my hands. After the last shot's fired either me or Garson is goin' to be dead—"

"Don't talk like that."

"It needs to be said. And if he kills me I don't want anyone grievin'." He paused. "Least of all the woman I love."

She came into his arms quickly. He kissed her, surprised at the suddenness of it, but grateful that it was so. He didn't mind the coolness of the snow on her face and hair.

She said at last, smiling slightly, "It's good for a man to be considerate. But there can be too much of a good thing." She pressed her hands to his shoulders, and she wasn't smiling now. "Steve, how could you believe that danger matters—"

"This sort does," he insisted sharply. He strode to the bureau, drew several stars out of the drawer and threw them on the bed. He said emphatically, "There's some of the badges everyone's talkin' about. Men with sweethearts wore them, probably. What are they now? What's left? Nothin' but crosses in the ground. I reckon I'll fight my battles so's only I can get hurt," he told her.

"You can't do that."

He frowned. "Why?"

"Because anything that hurts you will hurt me."

Austin caressed her deep black hair with an awkward hand. Even as he talked he felt a quickening affection for her gentleness. "Maybe," he said, "Garson will wear a tombstone. Maybe my life will be my own."

"Our life will be our own," she corrected him. She didn't have to probe further to understand. Somehow, she felt she had

always sensed the reason behind his remoteness. She knew she could do nothing now.

"Do come over the house tonight, Steve," she said, darting to the door. "Dad needs some cheering up. We'll talk more later. I've got to rush now. Have to order a stack of provisions at the general store before we get snowed in and starve."

Austin moved to the door and watched her disappear down the staircase at the end of the corridor. The last he saw of her was her dark hair tossing with each step.

SNOW was foaming in the wind when Austin strode down the Main Street of Bonanza Bar towards Chuck Massey's cabin. The whole scene seemed unreal under the snowfall. The shabbiness of the drab false fronts and crooked roads had been painted away by the white, rushing wind. Overhead, a crescent moon rode brilliantly.

Austin peered skyward through the flowing snow-curtain. He could see the dark crescent of the moon, closing in on the light portion like the arms of a perfectly curved and symmetrical pair of tongs. He watched the piece of light cling to the tips of the crescent, almost by its fingertips. Any minute now, he thought, and it would fall off.

He was being crowded like that too, he thought bitterly. Somehow Garson had smashed everything he'd tried to build. He'd cost him more than his business, more than the slug he had caught in his shoulder, more than the pain of the nine stars. And in a strange way, more than his suffering at being so near Betty and yet so far away.

Garson had invaded his life. No single hurt could tally it. It was a combination of many. His present wasn't time to live in. It was time only to kill or be killed. His future? He had none, with Garson loose on the land. It was as if every other aspect of his life had been crowded into insignificance, leaving that single, burning issue, which alone mattered.

Austin glanced at the star on his chest, and remembered Garson's murderous boast. An ironic smile curled his lips. Someone had once cautioned him to count ten when he got angry. Well, Garson could also count to ten. He'd reached nine already. The outlaw would be coming soon for his tenth badge. Steve Austin felt that in his bones.

A gun-barrel jammed against his spine. His arms stopped swinging. He froze, powerful gunhand lowering toward leather.

"If you want to die, go ahead, draw," a man said.

Austin felt the pressure of the gun with every nerve in his body. He snapped, "Who are you? What the hell is this?"

The gun-barrel stabbed deeper. "Reach! We'll palaver later."

Austin knew the language of death. Whoever had spoken had not talked to listen to himself. He reached.

A swift hand seized his gun. The man said, "Turn around, tin-badge. Take a good look. Remember us?"

Austin glared at Garson's gunhawks, lining their sixes on him in the snowy dusk. "I busted your face once, Simmons," he told the burly outlaw. "Reckon you're askin' for more of the same. Clark here is too yellow for a man-to-man fight. But you should know better than to pull this kind of a sneak on me."

Clark's handsome brown eyes glittered. "I'll cut you down to my size, you big coyote!" he said. "Keep your gun on him, Simmons."

Clark lunged forward and drove the barrel of his Colt across Austin's temple in one furious motion. Austin saw it coming, but couldn't dodge it. The gun-barrel glanced off his head. Austin staggered and crashed into the snow. He got up on all fours, shook his head and arose, wiping a crimson smear from a welt on his face.

Austin's hands clenched. He said, "I'll pay you back for this. I promise you that."

Simmons put in harshly. "Say the word, Clark, and I'll let light through him like he's a pane of glass! There'll be one more lawdog sent plumb to hell!"

"Buryin' this hombre," said Clark, "would suit me like nothin' else. But the Chief wants it his way. Hold off."

Austin's lips twisted. *The Chief*. So Garson was behind this. Somehow he felt calm and relaxed, now that the moment was here. He had a curious recollection of two crossed cavalry swords on the wall of his father's room long ago. One had fallen off and the other seemed incongruous there by itself. He itched to cross swords again with Garson. He almost laughed when Clark threatened him.

"Lead the way, coyote," he told the baffled owlhooter. "Garson, eh? Long time no see."

CHUCK MASSEY had his back to the wall and his hands in the air when Garson's gunhawks shoved Austin through the door of the old prospector's cabin. The oldster's heavily-lined face was raw from many blows. He was unarmed. There were spots of crimson on the planks at his feet. Blood streamed from his cruelly torn lips, putting patches of red in his gray beard. His flannel shirt had been ripped open at the throat. Austin saw at once that the rawhide string was gone.

Massey was staring behind Austin, at the far corner of the room. He turned when Steve came into the room. "Austin!" he gasped. "This Garson sidewinder beat me up and stole my map! The three of them jumped me, then two of them went out huntin' for you. Garson knew about the map. The snake said he spied on me while I camped in Red Dog—"

"Garson," Austin said. He whirled.

"Yeah, Garson." The crop-eared gunhawk chief came striding out of the corner. His gun was up. With a curt gesture, he ordered his gunnies to guard the miner.

Garson advanced toward Austin, hate flickering in his eyes. He reached out and ripped Austin's star off his shirt. "Number ten," he said. "I'll stomp this in the ground of your grave. You damn tinbadges say a man who lives by the gun, dies by the gun. Well, I'm turnin' the tables. You lived by the law. You'll die by it!"

"I know another saying," Austin commented. "Like father, like son. Maybe you're headin' for a hangrope."

Garson grinned. "If talk was ammunition you'd be an arsenal," he said, "instead of a windbag." He called to his aid, "Clark, you got his gun?"

"Yeah, Chief."

"Give it here."

Garson took the lawman's gun, holstered his own. Then he turned, and shot Chuck Massey in the chest three times before Austin could move.

For a moment the lawman had stared with macabre fascination at the quick red breathing of his own gun. Then he saw his partner's body crumple in death, and he went wild. He lunged for Garson, fists driving. Pain numbed his left arm straight to the shoulder as his fist landed. Garson had been too quick. He had ducked the blow, slashed Austin's fist with his gunbarrel.

"Quick!" Garson was shouting. "The chair, Simmons! Brain him!"

A weight crashed against the back of Austin's head, driving a spinning blackness into his brain. The blackness had its own weird sound. It whirred in his ears and became a deafening roar. He couldn't see. His head was filled with the black roaring . . . and then even that was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Bloody Trail to Red Dog

AUSTIN came to with a tremendous exertion of will. His head was splitting. His left hand ached, and he knew without investigating that it was grotesquely swollen. He remembered Chuck Massey, shot down in cold blood before his eyes, and the memory sickened him with a stifling nausea. He didn't think of the stolen map and his own pain. He could imagine the look in Betty's eyes when this was told her.

Through his confusion, he felt a rifle prod his side. He forced the haze out of his head and blinked his eyes open. He was stunned. What were these men doing here; why did they stare at him like that? Sheriff Carlisle, his deputies, Swift and Doyle, and the sullen crowd of miners. The condition of the room gave him an added shock. It was an upheaval of overturned chairs and tables. Massey's body had been moved next to him and his dead hands clenched the arm of the chair with which he had been struck down.

"Plain murder." Sheriff Carlisle vigilantly guarded Austin with his Winchester. A faithful lawman who was more proud of his profession than his own faultless record of service, he was bitter. "Sometimes I think gold can make a killer out of saint."

Swift nodded. "Never reckoned Austin'd be the man to turn owlhoot. Much less kill his pardner."

"Don't surprise me none," Doyle said. "There's been bad blood between Massey and Austin for some time. The whole town's been wonderin' what it would come

to." He pointed at Austin's Colt. "It came to murder. Poor Massey was unarmed. He never had a chance." Doyle paced swiftly about the room, reconstructing the crime. He indicated the blood on the floor, near the wall. "They fought here, looks like. Austin hurt his hand sluggin' it in his partner's face. Massey must have got his hands on a chair and hit him over the head just as Austin fired. And that's why we found them this way when we come investigatin' the shots. . . ."

The emergency cleared Austin's head like a dash of cold water in his face. He leaped to his feet and told them bitterly they were fools. They listened in silence to his tirade. He went over the details of Garson's murderous plan, the robbery of the map, the loss of his star.

"Hogwash," Doyle clipped out. "We looked, and there ain't any tracks around this cabin, of Garson or anybody. Own up, damn you, you're caught red-handed! You threw your star away to cover yourself with an alibi. Garson never took no map. You stole the map yourself, mebbe a couple days ago, and killed Massey when he demanded his share!"

Austin countered desperately, "Of course there are no tracks outside. The snow wiped out the sign!"

Stony silence answered him. Austin had the feeling that he was trying to break down a mountain by shouting at it.

One grim-faced miner opined loudly, "that law stuff is all right, I reckon, but leave this coyote in us miner's hands and we'll show the star-toters some real justice." A mutter of accord rose from the townsmen. Suddenly, the muttering fell away. A hush filled the room. The men prodded one another significantly, and made an aisle for the girl who came forward from the rear.

BETTY'S face was white. She walked stiffly, her arms hardly moving. She wavered as she neared her father's body, then braced herself. She knelt down, looking at no one else. No sound escaped her tightened lips, but they moved in prayer.

Austin saw the suffering in her eyes and his heart hurt him with a kind of leadenness he had never before known. Everyone watched the girl kneeling beside her murdered father. There was no sound in the room.

Austin said sharply. "I was here when he died, Betty. He has three bullets in him that were fired by my gun. I was hit over the head by the chair in his hands. But I didn't kill your father!"

She arose and faced him, brushing her hand tiredly through her hair. Strangely, he noticed even now the glistening snowflakes there. "You're no murderer," she said flatly. "Of course I know that." She whirled on the miners. She said, her voice heavy with emotion, "There's been enough of killing and the talk of it. Nobody will even speak of lynch-law and stay in this house. Is that clear?"

The miners showed their mood clearly. They wouldn't be buffaloed long. They left the house a sullen, threatening mass.

Sheriff Carlisle eyed them worriedly as they departed. He spoke softly to his deputies who removed the body, the girl following them outside to the horses.

Carlisle told Austin, "Those miners mean to come out after your neck tonight. But lynch-law has never broken into my jail—and I haven't tore it down, neither. You'll be under special guard all night. Then I'll have you switched to another county calaboose, come mornin'." He lifted his Winchester. "Get movin' to the horses."

Out of slitted eyes, Austin watched the Winchester follow him, at hip level, as he neared the door. He tensed. He sprang sideways at the entrance, flattened up against the cabin wall. As he expected, the lawman lunged through the door, rifle leveling. Austin seized the barrel and wrenched. The gun came away in his hands. Stumbling, the lawman clawed for his six-gun. Austin stepped in close and chopped the rifle-butt down at his head. Carlisle crumpled inertly into the snow.

Austin retrieved his Colt from the lawman's holster. He flung away the rifle. He would be moving too fast for such encumbrances. He regretted the necessity of clubbing the sheriff. But there had been no other way out. Escape had been his only chance for living, for the opportunity to corral the real murderers and establish his innocence.

He raced around the cabin where the deputies had ground-tied their horses. He was in the saddle of Boyle's roan when they spotted him. They were busy tying the old prospector's body to another horse. The

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roan's shrill whinny roused them to the escape, and both men filled their hands fast. Lead went singing past Austin's ears.

Austin didn't fire back at them. He rode for the hills, Indian fashion, clinging to the side of the roan, and praying silently within himself.

HE RODE headlong for Red Dog, traveling almost by instinct. Only old familiarity with the terrain kept him in the saddle. The lashing wind obliterated trails, threw handfuls of snow at his narrowed eyes, his bitterly tightened lips. They stung. They blinded him, baffled the roan, made horse and rider flounder, and filled Austin with a raging feeling of impotence. Yet he was grateful for the change the snow had brought to the earth. Bloodhounds couldn't follow his trail, now.

The roan was blowing hard when he reached the outskirts of the ghost-town. He kicked snow from a clump of red-limbed manzanita and ground-tied the mount. He carefully cleaned and reloaded his gun, then marched to the abandoned line of shacks.

He advanced toward the livery stable, intent on cutting off the escape of Garson's gunhawks first. If he could corral their mounts, they'd be prisoners of the storm, confined to Red Dog.

He had his left hand on the door of the livery stable when footsteps sounded inside. The door creaked inward, away from his touch. Austin leaped sideways, froze up against the wall. His sixgun lifted out of leather, leveled.

First he saw a shadow. It slanted out of the opening door and lay on the snow. Then a man followed it outside. Austin's lips thinned when he saw Clark's handsome profile. The gunhawk was alone.

Clark swung away from the stable door. The shadow on the snow leaped back as the gunman crouched in fear. His face was white. He opened his mouth.

"Shut up," Austin whispered. "Call out, and I'll put a slug in your pretty teeth."

Clark shut his mouth so fast his teeth clicked. Then the fear dimmed in his eyes. He grinned craftily. "You big coyote," he said venomously, "you're shootin' blanks. Fire that gun and Garson and Simmons will be out here blasting you pronto." Resolution flamed in his eyes. He flung himself to

one side, his hand slashing madly for iron.

AUSTIN moved fast. He couldn't afford noise. He closed in, seized Clark's gun-wrist and tore the half-drawn Colt out of his hand.

Clark was twisting, opening his mouth to shout the alarm, when Austin's right fist smashed it. The alarm never came. Clark spat teeth and blood instead, the lower half of his face turning crimson. The dark little outlaw went berserk. He lashed back desperately and with cunning. Austin winced when a knee jacknifed into his belly. Waves of nausea swamped through him.

Clark tore loose, dove for the gun in the snow. Austin leaped on top of him. The fighters rolled over and over in the snow, tearing great gashes in the flat whiteness.

Austin's strength was drained by the sickening nausea. He fought it off slowly. He pounded his fists at the shifting face in the foamy earth.

His left arm was a numb agony from fingertips to shoulder. He was vaguely surprised that pain could be so remote. Tireless, he pounded left and right at his enemy in the snow.

Clark's hand crawled to the gun-butt, lifted it. Austin had no time to lunge for it. Instead, he wrapped both his powerful hands around Clark's throat and threw himself sideways. The gun roared, a shaft of flame tearing past the lawman's face. The shot scorched his hair. Austin rallied his superior weight and rolled over and over in the snow, shaking the outlaw loose from his gun as a terrier shakes a rat. He didn't let go of Clark's throat right away. When he did, he knew without looking at him that Clark was dead. He groped to his feet, taking vast gulps of air into his lungs.

He had barely enough time to stampede the outlaw's horses from the livery stable when two figures came running out of a cabin in the distance.

Austin leaped into a snowdrift, crouched until the white camouflage reached to his shoulders. His gun-hand was out, the Colt held in readiness.

Garson and Simmons brought up short at the corpse in the snow. Garson whirled for the stable. "Something's gone wrong!" he shouted at Simmons. "We're not waiting to find out what. We got the mine, and

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we're taking no chances. Stay here and wait. I'll go get the horses."

Simmons was standing alone beside Clark's body, staring, fascinated, at the flakes of snow falling into his partner's staring brown eyes. Austin said, "I busted your face once, Simmons. Now I'll have to blow it off."

Simmons whirled. His gun was in his hand and it tilted. "Austin!" he shouted. Austin had risen ghostily from the snowbank. Both shots roared almost as one. Austin winced as a slug burned across his left forearm, giving it new agony.

But Simmons was crumpling, all at once, legs, arms and body, like a dead leaf crushed in the hand. A round, red circle stained his forehead over his left eye.

AGAIN Austin crouched, shielding himself in the snowbank. There was silence from the livery stable. Garson had been warned by Austin's shout; he was playing possum.

He remained absolutely motionless in the snowbank, disregarding the chill that crawled up and down his back. It was the longest vigil he had ever known. No sound came from the stable. The silence extended from the shabby walls to the wind and snow and the still figures on the ground.

The first man-sound came from the distance. Gruff commands cut through the night. Austin recognized Doyle's voice, giving commands: "This ghost-town has more than ghosts! Unless these horses are strays. Search the town, men!"

Austin threw a bluff. "Hear that, Garson?" he shouted. "My men are coming for you with a hangrope! They weren't buffaloed by your murder plan. Come on out and face the music, or I'll have them burn the stable around your ears!"

The sound of his voice was still in his throat when Garson came lunging out.

Wind whipped a clump of brush, and Garson's panic stampeded him. He snapped his gun up and fired twice. Then, when no answering shots came, he paused uncertainly, peering through the snow.

His back was to Austin. Austin strode out of the snowbank. He said, "Leather your iron!"

Garson stiffened as though shot. Slowly, he slid his gun into its holster. He swung

around, his gunhand low, his body twisted sideways.

Austin marched to within eight paces of him, then swiftly leathered his sixgun. He forgot everything else in life, the world. His body was calm, loose.

"All right, Garson," he said. "Now, damn you, draw!"

He saw a flicker of uncertainty in Garson's eyes. The distance closed to six paces, an almost suicidal range. Garson dove frantically for his Colt. Two shots roared in the mountain quiet.

Garson had triggered his last bushwhack gun. Austin killed him with a shot through the heart. Blood stained his shirt as he fell.

Austin did not see him die. Garson's wild bullet had driven along his scalp. He pitched forward into the snow.

CONSCIOUSNESS came slowly, piece by piece. First the feeling of his pain, then the protesting throb of the pulses in his head, then hands. Soft, deft hands were helping him, bandaging his head and arm. He heard a confusion of voices. He fought and gagged on fiery whisky.

"Easy does it lad," a man was saying.

Austin swallowed another fiery mouthful and opened his eyes. He was amazed at the lack of snow in the air. The walls of his own hotel room seemed strangely foreign to him. There was a crowd of miners, sitting around awkwardly.

Then he remembered the duel.

He stared upwards at the soft hands dressing his scalp-wound and he didn't think of that any longer. Betty Massey was deftly tightening the bandage.

"Well, you're getting up," she said.

He nodded.

"The posse found you in the snow and brought you back," she told him. "They found your badge and the map in Garson's pockets, proving his guilt." She paused, her gray eyes clouding as she remembered.

He said, "That's no help, Betty."

"No, it isn't." She nodded and dried some melting snow on her face with the blanket. He saw her face was flushed from being outdoors again. "But you're still partners with a Massey," she said.

She leaned over and kissed him, heedless of watching miners elbowing each other.

THE END

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(Continued from page 6)

prepared for a trip. He said, "I'm sending you east to a flag station. It won't be safe to have them find you here."

When the train stopped at the station, I saw that the conductor was Pat Donley, an old friend of mine from Dodge. Pat said, "You got out just in time. That Mex is dead. A large gang was watching for you at the train and the cavalry is parading the the streets to keep order."

It was just getting day when we reached Tucumcari. The train was ordered held there on account of a freight wreck a few miles east, and would be detained several hours. I was walking along the platform, my arm in a sling, and feeling miserable, when two fellows came up and lifted my gun saying, "We've got you, you damn' murderer!"

One pulled a pair of handcuffs, and the other said, "Don't do that. I hope he tries to break away, then I'll have an excuse to shoot him."

I asked, "What's this all about?" One said, "You act just like all killers, but you'll soon find out."

They rushed me to a small building, and I saw it was a police station. They pushed me inside and one said, "Draper, we caught the murderer and he was trying to get away on that train." The captain looked at me and said, "You damn' murderer, the sooner you're hanged, the safer it will be for decent people."

I asked, "Who am I accused of murdering?"

"You know well enough. You killed old man Gaston with a knife in his shack tonight for his money and now you've forgotten it. His wife tells us he shot the robber in the right arm, and now you're here with your arm in a sling. You're guilty as hell!"

One of the police remarked, "We'd better draw the blinds and bar the door. If Gaston's friends sees him here they will sure lynch him without a trial, and we can't prevent it." When this was done Draper said, "Search him for the money." They pulled money from my pockets, smeared with blood, and all seemed greatly excited.

One of them picked up a rope in a corner and said, "Let's hang him and save time." I was really getting scared now. I ask them if I could wire some friends. Draper refused.

While they was tying my good hand behind my back before taking me someplace, Draper said, "It don't make any difference in your case, but who did you want to wire to for help?"

"Wyatt Earp and Bill Tilghman who is in Santa Fe, or Bob Wright and Bat Masterson in Dodge," I replied.

They all looked astonished and one said, "If he isn't the one who murdered Gaston, we're in a hell of a mess." The other one said, "If they are his friends and come here, I'm leaving."

Just then someone was hammering on the door. When the door was opened, in came Pat Donley, and if you ever saw an Irishman mad, Pat was.

Pat asked, "George, what are they doing to you?"

"Going to hang me for murder, I guess, and I really believe they mean it," I replied.

"Who do they claim you murdered?"

Draper said, "He murdered old man Gaston tonight for his money, and we found the money on him smeared with blood. Gaston's wife tells us her husband shot the robber in the arm, and now he comes in here with his arm in a sling."

Pat said, "You're all crazy. This is George Bolds. He came here on this train with me and was not in your town before tonight. That cut on his wrist was made with a knife in Santa Fe. That blood on the money was his own blood and not the one you claim he killed, and I can prove it."

Draper looked embarrassed and said, "Your word is good for me, Pat." Then to his men, "Release the prisoner."

Back on the train, Pat said, "The boys will give you a lot of kidding for being run out of Santa Fe as an undesirable citizen."

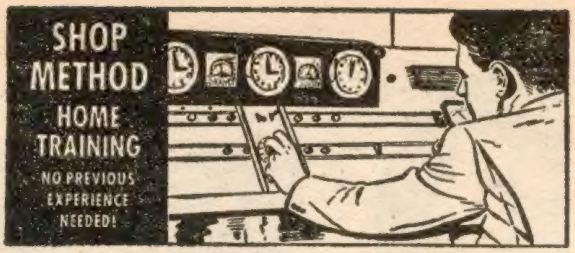
All I could say to that was, "Well, it took the United States Cavalry to do it!"

Thank you, Mr. Bolds, for that glimpse of the old West. We try to give our readers the most vigorous, action-packed Western fiction there is, but it's our bet that few fiction stories could be more exciting than that incident—to a man who was actually in it!

But for those of us who haven't been lucky enough to live in those dramatic, history-making times, we have a substitute in the next issue of *New Western*.

In the big, new November issue, there's a Roy M. O'Mara novelette even more hilarious—if possible—than "Crazy Springs' Write-In Vote"; a colorful animal story by a new author, Conrad Feige—and a large assortment of fiction by Thompson, Irwin, and many more!

The November issue will be published August 25th! —THE EDITOR.



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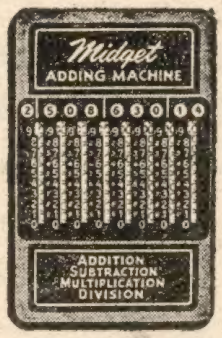

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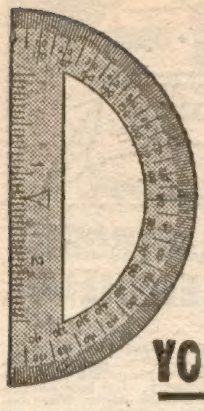

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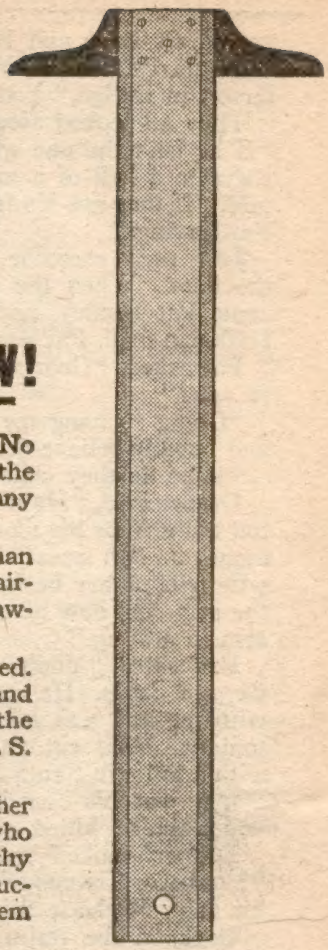

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